

Kung Fu by Giddens Ko, the story of a Taiwanese middle school student who is obsessed with wuxia novels and ends up learning martial arts from a mysterious old man.

A movie based on Kung Fu was released.

Giddens Ko is a popular Taiwanese author and director.

The Chinese pseudonym under which he writes literally means "nine knives." To date he has written about 60 books.

His directorial debut "You Are the Apple of My Eye" was based on his own novel of the same name.

Translator : deathblade

<http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/member.php/5110-deathblade>

Translation Completed.



Part 1

I squatted next to the old man, blocking the vision of my surrounding classmates. From within my bag I pulled out a few hundred-yuan bills and stuffed them into his hand. "Sir," I said softly, "I'm not looking down on you. I just want to help you buy a few meals. But please don't bother me any more, okay? I'm a 20th century middle-school student, and in this age, students have to study their books, not go into the mountains to practice martial arts. I'm really sorry."

Prologue

1986.

That year, I was 13 years old, an inauspicious age.

That year, Chang Yu-sheng [1] was still alive, Dave Wong [2] was popular, and Fang Jiwei [3] was still the Sweetheart of the Military.

Their songs filled my room every day.

That year, I met him.

That year, kung fu.

Old man (1)

I was a really dull person, at least in the eyes of my friends. There was nothing special about me. I was just a regular first-year middle-school student who conformed to the norms of society.

The first year of middle school didn't have a lot of homework pressure, and nothing ever happened to get anxious about. Because of the limitations of the time period and my own reclusive personality, I had nothing to do with the outrageous things that some other kids enjoyed, like doing drugs, going on joyrides or getting in knife fight contests.

It's not that I tried to be dull on purpose, it's just that different types of personalities gravitate toward different methods of diversion. As for me, the entertainment bore that I was, I spent most of my leisure time at the book store reading.

It's not that I read the books at the store because I lacked money to buy them. In fact, my family owned a textile manufacturing company, which was a very profitable industry in the 80's. But I never had any desire to go back to my lackluster house.

When my dad's disreputable comrades turned our living room into a tavern, carousing and being loud, I would duck my head down and dash past them, then head to the book store to read novels.

I would usually stay for about two hours each time.

My taste in novels was quite predictable. If it wasn't Jin Yong [4] it was

Gu Long [5]. I found the wuxia [6] worlds they created with their pens to be incredibly fascinating. It was a simple world where you could wield a sword and kill scoundrels mercilessly. Much more interesting [7] than my house.

I still remember the evening I was standing like usual next to one of the tall bookshelves, perusing Jin Yong's *The Deer and the Cauldron* [8]. It was the part where Wei Xiaobao signs the Treaty of Nerchinsk [9] with the idiot Russians, running circles around the three parties involved: the Qing[10], the Russians, and the Heaven and Earth Society[11].

After finishing *The Deer and the Cauldron* I would have completed all of Jin Yong's works for the first time.

"Why don't you read this book?" said a hoarse voice.

I lifted my head and saw an old man standing next to me, looking at me, a book in his hand.

It was Jin Yong's *The Smiling Proud Wanderer* [12], which I had finished a long time ago.

"Thanks, I've read that one already," I said with a smile, then returned to the world of the book in my hand.

But after a while, I noticed the old man's silhouette, still there next to me. I grew a bit numb as I felt him staring at me.

"What about this book? It's great!" It was the old man's voice yet again.

I had no choice but to look up and glance at the book in his hand. Yep, it was Jin Yong's Ode to Gallantry [13].

"I've read that one, too. Thank you," I said courteously. An ordinary person like me will always use the appropriate amount of courtesy.

And courteous old me took a moment to appraise the old man's appearance.

I couldn't quite tell his age, because I've never been very good at doing that. But he was definitely old. He wore a dilapidated green Tang suit [14], and the wrinkles on his face that might have indicated his age were covered by filth and secretions. But his decrepitude was apparent from the acrid stench that drifted off of him.

I was a bit suspicious. Had the old man been sent here by the shopkeeper, a hint to not poke around the store all day reading? As soon as I thought of this, I felt a little bit bad.

I started to waver back and forth about whether or not to leave, but I also worried ... what if the old man really was just sincerely recommending books to me? If I just walked off, wouldn't it be a bit embarrassing?

I'd always been kind and timid, and would never do anything to embarrass anyone. Everyone said I was afraid of getting into trouble. Some people said I was easy to bully, and even more people said I was too nitpicky. So I gripped the book and started trying to decide when to leave. Should I leave? What would be the least embarrassing way to

leave? For the moment, I was undecided.

“What about this one? It’s brilliant!” The old man flashed another wuxia book in front of me. I looked at it sheepishly. It was Gu Long’s Meteor, Butterfly, Sword [15]. Frankly, I’d found it a bit boring.

“I’ve read that one too, I’m really sorry.” I looked at the man, feeling a little sorry.

Maybe I should pretend that I hadn’t read it, go along with his suggestion and glance through it.

But the old man didn’t seem to want to give up. In fact, his expression looked somewhat approving.

“You’re so young, yet you’ve read so much! Excellent, excellent. What about this one?” From the bookshelf, he pulled out a dust-covered copy of a book from the series Legend of the Swordsman from Mount Zu [16], then waited expectantly for my response.

Ah! Well, this series I had not read. Because Legend of the Swordsman from Mount Zu was way too long! It was so long, I had no idea how many books were in it. Seventy? Eighty? Haizhu Louzhu’s maudlin and verbose writing style was just too much for me.

“Oh, I haven’t read that series. When I’ve finished with The Deer and the Cauldron,” I said sincerely, “I’ll definitely read it.”

Unexpectedly, the old man’s eyes filled with a strange light. He

suddenly raised his voice and laughed, "Excellent, excellent! The little kid knows how to separate the wheat from the chaff, to discern the good from the bad. This Legend of the Dog Crap from Zu Mountain is a bunch of nonsense! Sword Saints and Blood Demons? Essence of the Mountain and Lake Monsters? Read it and you'll lose a chunk of your soul. It's not even worth glancing at." And then, he gripped the copy of Legend of the Swordsman from Mount Zu in his hands and ripped it in half. He threw his hands into the air, and the ripped pages fluttered about the bookstore like paper butterflies.

I will never forget how shocked I felt.

It was the first time in my life I had encountered an actual lunatic, and that type of memory is difficult to wipe out.

But at least I could be certain that the old man was not the shopkeeper's assistant, because I could see the flabbergasted shopkeeper himself hurrying over, wielding a broom.

"Out, out! Otherwise pay me for the book!" he ordered, suppressing his fury and speaking in a low voice. A few curious customers had gathered round.

The shopkeeper was a reasonable man. He could see in a single glance that the old man would not be able to pay for it. It would be too much of a pity to report him to the police, considering he seemed to be a little crazy.

The old man bowed deeply, and in a very regretful tone said, "Excuse me for my lack of manners. I got too excited and ripped your book into

pieces. I don't have much money on me now, but if possible, I would like to return tomorrow to pay it. I promise to provide both compensation and appreciation."

The old man spoke with the accent of some other province, perhaps that of Shandong or Shaanxi or Shanxi. I couldn't really tell.

"Just get out, don't interfere with my business! Out, out!" The shopkeeper's face had sunk.

The old man scratched his head guiltily, then squatted and began to collect the scattered book pages. Naturally, I squatted too and started to help him.

"There's no need, there's no need!" said the shopkeeper impatiently, urging the malodorous old man to leave. "The best way to help me is to just get out of here!"

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[1] Chang Yusheng was a popular Taiwanese pop singer. In hanyu pinyin his name would be Zhang Yusheng, but since he's Taiwanese I'll go with the accepted Taiwanese way of spelling it. <http://goo.gl/iIEQvC>

[2] Dave Wong was a Taiwanese pop producer. <http://goo.gl/8nP0gp>

[3] Fang Jiewei was a teen idol singer in Taiwan. I couldn't find any English articles about her, but apparently her nickname in the entertainment industry was Sweetheart of the Military, because one of her songs was extremely popular among the military at the time (and perhaps still is?). Here's an article in Chinese about her with pictures:

<http://goo.gl/AsBU5l>

[4] Jin Yong is most famous of all wuxia authors <http://goo.gl/NMIXg>

[5] Gu Long is one of the other most famous of wuxia authors
<http://goo.gl/wBjbho>

[6] Wuxia is Chinese martial arts fiction <http://goo.gl/69M9>

[7] He literally says that it is “cuter” than his house. It sounds fine in Chinese, but in English it seems weird, so I’m changing it to interesting.

[8] Here’s the Deer and the Cauldron to buy: <http://goo.gl/zMpcVq>. And to read for free here on the forum: <http://goo.gl/SEjDdQ>. Here’s an article about it: <http://goo.gl/HFN7R>

[9] The Treaty of Nerchinsk was the first treaty between Russia and China <http://goo.gl/7qC1ua>

[10] The Qing Dynasty was the second to last dynasty of China
<http://goo.gl/URG4wc>

[11] The Heaven and Earth society is a real secret society with a long history <http://goo.gl/XNEIAI>

[12] You can read The Smiling Proud Wanderer here on the forum: <http://goo.gl/D8ZHzk>. Here’s an article about it: <http://goo.gl/3JrNG0>

[13] Here’s a link to read a partial translation of Ode to Gallantry on the forum: <http://goo.gl/h1N19m>. And an article: <http://goo.gl/WYcHDN>

[14] The Tang suit is a traditional Chinese jacket for men. Here’s an article about it: <http://goo.gl/g1oRp0>. And here are some pictures <http://goo.gl/YLchl0>

[15] You can read a partial translate of Meteor, Butterfly, Sword on the forums here: <http://goo.gl/K0s80m>. And here is an article about it: <http://goo.gl/yHHP7v>

[16] I’m not very familiar with this story, but in the brief research I did, it’s pretty sure it’s the book that the movies Zu Warriors from the Magic Mountain and Legend of Zu were based on. In pinyin, the Zu should actually be Shu, but considering it appears to be in popular translation as

Zu, I will keep it that way.

Old man (2)

The old man stood up remorsefully, gave a deep bow and left the bookstore. I remained behind, ears burning, still collecting the ripped up paper.

The boss swept the remaining paper into a wicker dustpan, after which I stood there angrily reading for a few minutes. Then I bought a highlighter and escaped, my face filled with embarrassment.

Actually, from nose to tail, I remained blame-free for the whole situation. I didn't do anything at all. But I was the kind of person who hated awkwardness, and for something so embarrassing to occur made me want to die [17].

As I walked home, I couldn't stop thinking about the strange incident.

Actually, the old man was exceedingly polite, just a bit strange. It didn't seem like he had any ill intentions.

But to recommend novels to me so enthusiastically, it seemed really weird.

Whatever.

It was like a random question mark or exclamation point in life, not even enough to make a complete sentence.

I was walking through an alley about 300 meters from home. The defective streetlights flickered, causing my shadow to flash back and forth between dark and light. However, I had long since grown accustomed to walking through this alley at night, and had never believed in ghosts or monsters.

And then, my heart suddenly started beating faster. I couldn't control it.

A constrictive feeling roiled in the pit of my stomach, as if my whole body was being squeezed by the palm of a giant.

I forced myself to take a few deep breaths, and walked forward even faster. Inexplicably I, who usually hated going home, suddenly rushed back as quickly as possible.

This really was a strange alley.

There was something inexplicably queasy about it.

Everything had started.

The whole way home, I felt encompassed by a strange pressure, as if someone was watching me. It vanished the moment I walked through the front gate. I let out a sigh. I felt like I had just surfaced from deep in the ocean and could finally breathe. It was as if I had only imagined that feeling of moments ago.

"I'm back." I lowered my head and tossed off my shoes. I wanted nothing more than to dash from the front porch into my bedroom.

But I knew it wouldn't happen, not any more than a soldier sloshing up onto the beaches of Normandy could avoid bullets. It was a simple truth.

"Yuan Zai! Come and drink some tea! It's top quality stuff from the mainland!" The roaring voice belonged to a fat, bald loser.

He always claimed to bring top quality products from the mainland, and talked everything up as if it were the rarest treasure in the world. But I knew that he was conning my father. He looked like a treacherous court official, and yet I was forced to call him Uncle Wang.

My dad's loser drinking buddies shouted greetings, calling me over to the sofa to check out the rare, ancient teapot they were using and try some of the gourmet tea cakes. And then they proceeded to passionately instruct me how to distinguish the difference between good products and poor products. I think it would be better if they could teach my dad how to pick friends.

Amidst all the raucousness, my heart felt like a lump of excrement, but my face was filled with an expression that said, "Thank you for educating me so well, dear uncles!" It's not that I wanted to be a two-faced wolf like them, but rather, a problem with my personality. I never wanted to make anyone uncomfortable, that's all.

I stayed in the smoke-filled living room for an hour and half, before finally extricating myself and returning to my room. I felt like I hadn't seen it in ages. I was really tired.

A few days ago, dad had mentioned that in a few months he would go

to the mainland to open a factory, because the textiles industry in Taiwan was a quickly becoming a “Twilight Industry,” as he called it, with no real future. I really wished he would get to the mainland as soon as possible. As far as starting some factories and making some money, I didn’t really care. I just didn’t want him and his deadbeat friends messing up my life.

I took a shower and read a bit, then went to sleep. Same as usual.

The past few days, as I lay going to sleep, I kept thinking that maybe I should take some after-school cram courses. Not because of pressure regarding schoolwork, but because if I did that, it would give me a good excuse to come home late.

Ah forget it, I grumbled.

I’d keep going to the book store to read novels. At worst, I could read the monolithic Legend of the Swordsman from Mount Zu, and that would leave me with a true sense of accomplishment.

At that time, I assumed 1986 would pass by in a completely meaningless fashion. I wouldn’t leave anything behind, and wouldn’t take anything with me. It would be a completely blank piece of paper.

But!

Just before I actually fell asleep, I suddenly thought of something very strange.

I crawled out of bed and grabbed a novel, about one-hundred pages

long. I tried as hard as I could to rip it down the middle.

Just as I'd predicted, it was pretty much impossible.

If you tried really hard to rip it down the spine, to tear it into a front half and a back half, well maybe that was possible.

But to grab both ends and tear it into a cloud of paper, well that was simply impossible. Even if it was only a hundred pages like this book, it just was not as simple as it sounded.

I tugged back and forth until my wrists began to ache, but nothing happened to the little hundred-page book.

That old man at the bookstore had incredible wrist strength! With a laugh, he'd casually torn to pieces a novel of nearly three hundred pages. He was old but frighteningly powerful.

"Freak," I grumbled to myself, and then finally went to sleep.

When it comes to unbelievable things, it's best just to sigh and move on. It's stupid to spend time trying to get to the bottom of them.

The characteristic of curiosity barely existed in me at all.

The next day I rode my bicycle to school, the same as usual. But the usual part only lasted until I pushed my bike out the door.

That day, it felt like the pedals of the bike had been weighted down with bricks. Every pedal stroke took effort, and after riding for only five minutes, I stopped at a traffic light panting like a cow.

It felt like I was going to die at any moment.

My family's unhealthy lifestyle clearly had an enormously injurious effect on me and was causing my heart to age prematurely and perhaps fatally. But after my parents learned of the situation, would it be possible that they might let me rent a house and live on my own to recover my health?

My thoughts went wild, and in an instant, my heart started pounding again. It felt as if the blood vessels in my chest had started to expand.

It was just like the previous night in the alley!

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[17] The Chinese literally says it would "cause my cells to quickly die from poisoning."

[18] The name is Yuan Zai (淵仔) Yuān zǎi. The Yuan means deep or profound. In this case, Yuan is from his given name and Zai a character added on the end as sort of a term of endearment. This is something his family or friends would call him. The closest thing I can think of in English would be if someone's name was Richard, but some people called him Dick, and his friends and family called him Dicky.

Old Man (3)

Sweat poured down through my eyebrows, stabbing into my eyes, so I closed them.

Cold sweat.

My god, could it be that I really did have heart disease?

"Is it cold sweat?"

The voice was very familiar, as if I'd heard it before.

I opened my eyes. Standing there in front of me was the freakish old man from the book store, leaning forward, sincerely waiting for an answer.

I was a little bit perplexed and a little bit startled.

"I don't know. I'm sorry, I need to go to school." I quickly pushed down on the pedal, not wanting to be troubled by the old man any more.

One turn of the pedal and I slid past the crosswalk, but then suddenly it felt as if my bicycle was heavier than before.

I looked back and was nearly frightened to death.

The strange old man sat there on the back of my bike, staring at me, his eyes flashing.

If it had been you, what would you have done?

Stop the bike and give the old man a good thrashing?

Not me. Because my bike crashed. After all, I had just received an incredible, incredible fright.

I shrieked, but too late, as the bike toppled over to the left. My left knee banged onto the ground, tearing a hole into my blue pants. My left wrist also got scratched up.

And the old man?

He stood next to me without a mark on him. He peered down at me and asked, "Was it a cold sweat just now?"

This time I didn't care about the embarrassment. To sneak onto my bike in that way was unimaginably freakish. Perverted! Murderous!

"What's wrong with you?!" I rebuked the weird old man, struggling to pull my bicycle up. This time I wasn't polite at all, and gave full vent to my grievance.

The old man didn't seem to care about my wound and didn't seem to think he had done anything wrong. He only seemed to care about his

question.

"The sweat on your forehead, was it cold sweat?" The old man's question seemed so silly and meaningless. It led me to believe that he really was an out-and-out lunatic.

Once, a wise man, I'm not sure who, said: good answers come from good questions. Meaningless questions cannot give birth to insightful responses.

A wise man, and a good saying.

"It was cold sweat. Now don't bother me again!" I was pissed off, but I tried to keep my voice steady.

As soon as the old man heard what I said, his eyes lit up. He nodded quickly. "Excellent. Quite young, with ordinary capabilities but some good fundamentals. Well qualified!"

You, really, piss, me, off! [19]

"Do not follow me!" I jumped back onto my bike, and without glancing at the old man, pushed down on the pedal.

If I received any more frights, my heart would most likely split open and ooze forth with pus.

I looked back at the old man. He paced back and forth on the street

corner, seemingly lost in thought. I hurried to school.

What an unlucky morning.

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[19] What he says here is a super colloquial and especially Taiwanese flavored expression that can't be directly translated into English. The basic meaning is, you're annoying me, I hate you, I am pissed off, *etc.*

A terrifying annoyance (1)

In morning study hall, I sat in my seat stealthily eating my breakfast. The teacher, a crazy middle-aged woman, forbade eating, because a beautiful morning should be used to write papers, memorize characters, and ruin one's mood for the whole day.

"Thump thump thump." I felt my back being stabbed with a ballpoint pen.

"Are you hurt?" asked the girl sitting behind me.

It was Yi Jing [20]. She loved to stab my back with things during morning study hall and then secretly chat with me.

You guessed it. Every story must have a cute girl in it, and in this story, in my life, she was obviously the girl I liked. Although, how deeply can a middle school student comprehend love?

Perhaps it was because our class only had eleven girls in it that I liked the one who was generally acknowledged to be the second cutest.

The girl everyone thought was the prettiest, Xiao Mi [21], was the girl my friend Ah Lun [22] had sworn to woo over, so I wasn't interested in her at all.

"Listen, I ran into a crazy person this morning. He secretly jumped onto the back of my bicycle. God, it scared me half to death." I munched on a

water fried dumpling [23] and stared out the window at the class adviser kissing up to one of the teachers.

"So unlucky. Why did he jump on?" Yi Jing eyed one of the dumplings in my drawer. "Are they spicy?"

As usual, I had prepared a cup of cold rice milk and a water fried dumpling to give her. "Yeah, a little."

Last week, Yi Jing and I had made a bet about the results of the monthly English test, and at stake had been two weeks of breakfasts.

It was a game we two played. Our bets were usually over test results or papers. Up to now, the ratio of victories to defeats was a bit one-sided. I had three victories and seventeen unlucky defeats.

Yi Jing took the breakfast and asked, "So tell me, what type of crazy was he?"

I told her in great detail the whole story about what happened in the book store, as well as the crazy incident from this morning.

"Are you messing with me?" she said, surprised. "How could he jump onto your bicycle without you realizing it? Wouldn't he shake the whole thing?"

"Exactly!" I replied forcefully. "What was really strange was that it suddenly felt like the bike was extra heavy, and that's why I looked back... It must be because my health hasn't been very good lately, so I didn't

notice when it happened.”

“The old guy is strange, for sure,” said Yi Jing, “but the strength of his hands must be amazing.”

I nodded. “Last night I tried for a few minutes, and there’s no way to rip a book in two.”

Yi Jing giggled. “You’re really a lucky dog; the old man was merciful.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“When he was hiding on the back of your bike, he could have crack, twisted your neck in two...”

“Can you not be so disgusting?” I said. “I didn’t insult him. Why would he break my neck for no reason?”

At that moment a paper airplane hit me in the chest. I looked at the paper airplane crafter—Ah Lun. He winked, indicating for me to open the airplane.

I unfolded the paper, and inside was written, “No dating during morning study hall. P.S. Xiao Mi forgot to bring me breakfast, so I decided to tax you your sandwich.”

I looked at Ah Lun. He really did have sharp eyes. In a glance he’d noticed that I’d bought an extra sandwich.

And here is where I must mentioned Ah Lun and Ah Yi [24].

Ah Lun and Ah Yi were my best pals in the class. Ah Lun was very mature, probably because his parents had died early. He'd told me that he'd decided in the third grade to get married to Xiao Mi. He really was a little adult, and in his pursuit of Xiao Mi, he seemed to be just as persistent as the old man.

Ah Yi was the kind of person who after the prompt "My Aspiration," had written voluminously about his desire to become a gangster. And since his aspiration was to be a gangster, of course he could fight very well. He also had a special power: he could smoke ten cigarettes at one time. I had a bet going with Ah Yi, that if he hadn't died from lung cancer by the age of 40, he could demand one million yuan from me. If he did get lung cancer, he didn't have to give me anything, because that would already be tragic enough.

On the way back to the classroom after flag-raising ceremony, I told Ah Lun and Ah Yi about the old man.

"That old man's hands are strong. Great," said Ah Yi unconcernedly. "Call him over to fight me." Whenever Ah Yi spoke, the smell of cigarettes emanated from his mouth.

"For better or worse, he is an old person," said Ah Lun disapprovingly. "Have a little respect, okay?"

"How can I be so weak?" I said. "My knees are already hurting and we still have to climb a mountain."

The school I studied at was Changhua Middle School [25], which was horribly located half way up Bagua Mountain [26]. It was a really torturous trek.

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, my footsteps grew heavy.

Was it starting again?

My breathing became unstable and my chest tightened.

"The feeling I had last night and this morning, it's happening again." I ground my teeth and said, "You guys go back to the classroom, I'll catch up in a bit."

"Take care of yourself," said Ah Yi, walking on.

Ah Lun laughed. "Nice move. I should pretend to be sick too and see if it will make Xiao Mi worry about me."

My face twisted bitterly and I said, "I'm really not feeling good. I'm actually thinking maybe I should ask for leave and go home."

Ah Lun disapproved. "If you go back there to recover you'll die an early death."

I nodded in complete agreement. "Then I'll go to the hospital, get an X-ray and see if my heart really does have some sort of hole in it."

Suddenly, a pair of withered hands grasped my shoulders and turned me around, startling me half to death.

It was the same crazy old man who had knocked me down and hurt me this morning.

I was so startled that I didn't know whether to be angry or frightened. I just stood there stupidly, not even aware of whether or not my mouth was open.

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[20] The name is Yi Jing 乙晶 (Yǐ jīng). The character jing means crystal

[21] The name is Xiao Mi 小咪 (Xiǎo mī). The character mi is the onomatopoeia in Chinese for the mewling of a kitten

[22] The name is Ah Lun 阿纶 (Ā lún). It doesn't have any special meaning really.

[23] I couldn't find any english articles describing these types of dumplings but here's what they look like: <http://goo.gl/Ws0i5K>

[24] The name is Ah Yi 阿义 (Ā yì). The character yi means righteousness or justice

[25] Changhua is Giddens Ko's hometown. <http://goo.gl/1t5yNc>

[26] Bagua mountain is a real place in Changhua. <http://goo.gl/yJrNQF>

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By the way, I updated the first post of the thread. I added a table of

contents as well as some information about the upcoming movie version of this book.

A terrifying annoyance (2)

Ah Lun was also frozen for a moment. But then, almost immediately, he shouted, "What are you doing?" He pulled me back. "This is that weird old guy?" he asked. "The one who messed with you this morning?"

I nodded, thinking that I should be getting angry. I looked at the old man. He still wore the same old green Tang suit, but the filth smeared on his face couldn't cover the exuberance in his eyes.

"What do you want?" I asked weakly.

"Do you feel bad?" The old man looked me up and down.

I nodded my head vigorously. "Every time I see you I feel bad, so please don't bother me any more. I'll read the book you recommended, I promise." At this point, a handful of students had gathered around, watching curiously.

The old man shook his head. Laughing, he said, "Do you feel better now?"

Another stupid question!

Just as I was about to flip out, my whole body suddenly felt very relaxed, as comfortable as if I had been submerged in a warm, bubbling hotspring. The mysterious pressure had been washed away.

I was reduced to silence, not sure of what to say. Then I heard Ah Lun say, "Grandpa, please don't bother him any more. We have to go to class soon."

It seemed as if the old man didn't hear Ah Lun at all. He looked at me eagerly.

I forced myself to nod and say, "I suddenly feel much better."

The old man seemed to go wild with joy. He grasped my arms and exclaimed, "Then it is decided! Kneel to me and accept me as your master! Get on your knees!"

This time I did not hesitate at all, was not the least bit doubtful. "Master my ***!"

The old man looked dumbfounded, then responded loudly: "Quickly! Beg me to teach you martial arts [27]! Then I will pretend I need to consider." This was exactly the same as what happened in Demi-gods and Semi-Devils [28], in the part of the story where the Crocodile Deity of the Southern Sea tries to force Duan Yu to be his disciple.

The old man gripped my arm so hard it hurt, and I couldn't get free. But my mouth wasn't covered. "What kind of martial arts are you going to teach me, you lunatic!? Teach me how to go crazy?"

"You've got guts to stick around, you old fogie!" cursed Ah Lun. "I have a friend who's a professional fighter!" He turned and ran off to find Ah Yi.

The old man ignored the surrounding students. He looked at me cautiously. "You have a high level of aptitude! But I am not sure if I have time to teach you martial arts. It depends on your level of sincerity."

At that point I flipped out, crazily roaring, "What are you ranting about? I didn't ask you to teach me!"

The old man tilted his head, and in a somewhat foolish sounding tone said, "Given that you have this level of sincerity and good faith, you should kneel next to me for three days and three nights. Then I will consider the situation carefully."

My arms were pinned, so I tried to kick the old man in the stomach, shouting, "Someone go and get the Dean!"

My kick hit his stomach, but he reacted as if he hadn't felt a thing. "It is hard to tell whether your kick is hard or soft, it is quite messy all over. I can tell that you have been practicing blindly and achieving little progress. Your feet are bound and you cannot move forward. You seek accomplishment but can never achieve it. It is definitely because you lack the direction of a good teacher."

I was beyond furious, and aimed a kick at his shin bone. But this time his foot flew up, he drew back his knee, and then kicked out lightly. His tattered shoe adhered like glue to my kicking foot.

The old man shook his head and said, "With this kick you attacked the prepared. It was a big mistake followed by a bigger mistake. After you make such a mistake, you cannot take it back. It is adding mistake upon mistake. If you want to avoid mistakes like this, you need to study at least

one year of Heaven Reaching Painted Footsteps [29] with me.”

“I’ll paint your mother!” It was Ah Yi. He walked over, a cigarette hanging from his mouth, his head low, a ruthless expression in his eyes.

“Grandpa,” said Ah Lun kindly, “You still haven’t left? My friend here is very impudent. He’ll beat up anyone; kids, pregnant women, old people, cripples.”

The old man looked at Ah Yi noncommittally. “Youthful arrogance is taboo in the School of Military thought [30]. It is a portent of fire deviation [31]. Sadly, even though you are on the wrong path, I don’t have time to teach you any good martial arts.”

Ah Yi pushed Ah Lun aside. “Let go of Shao Yuan[32]!” he said fiercely. “Otherwise, I’ll bury you under that tree over there.” Ah Yi pointed at the Royal Poinciana tree [33] next to the corridor entrance. Everyone standing around watching laughed quietly, and a few took positions to keep watch in case anyone approached.

The old man sighed and released me. “It seems that I cannot become your master today. Come find me another day and do your best to complete the ceremony. I live at...”

Ah Yi threw his cigarette butt toward the old man’s face, and then, fast as lightning, threw a punch toward his lower abdomen. The old man accepted the blow and dropped to his knees. Ah Yi kicked him hard in the face, “You still don’t scram?” He had no respect whatsoever for the aged, and he held back no power.

At this point I actually felt sorry for the old man. He was so old, and yet was receiving a beating from Ah Yi.

"Stop it!" Ah Lun and I held back Ah Yi. I looked at the old man lying there on the ground and sighed. "Don't bother me again, really."

I squatted next to the old man, blocking the vision of my surrounding classmates. From within my bag I pulled out a few hundred-yuan bills and stuffed them into his hand. "Sir," I said softly, "I'm not looking down on you. I just want to help you buy a few meals. But please don't bother me any more, okay? I'm a 20th century middle-school student, and in this age, students have to study their books, not go into the mountains to practice martial arts. I'm really sorry."

This was my lack of personality. Some people said I was too sentimental, like a distracted woman.

I looked at the old man, and tears glistened within his eyes [34]. I was deeply concerned that I had damaged his dignity.

And then, unexpectedly, the old man grabbed my hand. Appreciatively, he said, "Payment for lessons first, education later. Your sincerity has sincerely moved me. I'll accept the tuition. Later, I will teach you every stance of kung fu that you need. It really is fate."

I simply wanted to faint.

Then the bell sounded. Ah Lun pulled me solemnly toward the classroom, on the one hand admonishing Ah Yi for being so excessive as

to hit and kick the old man, on the other hand reminding us of how incredibly crazy the man was.

What if he had been abandoned by his children and left to live on the street?!

Perhaps because they had deserted him, he spent the days acting crazy to try to gain sympathy.

I sat in geography class, unable to wipe from my mind the image of the old man being knocked to the ground. I couldn't help but look at Ah Yi, who was sleeping on his desk, and flip him the bird. He really had gone too far.

That day when classes let out, I walked with Yi Jing, slowly following Ah Lun and Xiao Mi down the mountain.

"That old man really is weird," said Yi Jing. "Who knows, you might even see him again soon..."

**

[27] The word for martial arts here is 武功 wu gong. It is a word that pretty much only appears in wuxia fiction. For the old man to say he will teach him "wu gong" makes him sound crazy, because wu gong implies the kind of fantastic, super powered martial arts that are depicted in wuxia novels.

[28] You can read an incomplete translation of Demi-gods and Semi-devils here on the forum <http://goo.gl/lb7qSC>. Here is an article about it

<http://goo.gl/fxeu9p>

[29] As for the “painted footsteps,” the Chinese makes it sound like you are using your feet and legs to “paint” some specific movement or step.

[30] This was one of the philosophical Schools of 100 thought
<http://goo.gl/gZlarX>

[31] This is a (fictional) injury that occurs when you practice martial arts incorrectly. Usually it involves serious and potentially fatal internal injuries

[32] This is his real name. The name “Yuan Zi,” previously used, would be what his family calls him. The character shao 劬 Shào means excellent.

[33] Read more about this type of tree here <http://goo.gl/G13mC>

[34] But he did not shed them. Zhu Meng and Gao Jianfei would be proud. <http://goo.gl/BWxeQP>

A terrifying annoyance (3)

"To be frank," I said, "when Ah Yi beat him up this morning, it really made me feel depressed. All day. Shit."

"You're really too nice. That's why you always get bullied." As she walked the stairs down the mountain, Yi Jing looked at her English notebook, which was filled with words.

"No matter what anybody says, seeing an old person get hit will ruin anyone's mood. Originally I could complain about that old guy nonstop," I grumbled, "but now I feel a little sorry for him."

Yi Jing nodded. She could always understand me.

Maybe it was just youthful sentiment, but I'd always had a really pure affection for Yi Jing. The best part of every day was when class let out and we walked down Bagua Mountain together. In fact, being able to go to class with her might be the main reason I came to school at all.

But they say that the pure affections of one middle school student for another can only be limited to—yes, pure affection.

I had to agree.

The tree-lined path down Bagua Mountain was beautiful. The golden rays of the setting sun flickered amongst the tree leaves. Occasionally, a crisp leaf would rustle past our shadows, carried along by a light breeze.

It was a decent spring.

Yi Jing was a simple girl. Perhaps she wasn't ready to date yet. No problem, I wasn't ready yet either. It was fine to spend our humdrum youth just like this.

Just as I was indulging in my daydreams, sighing dramatically, I suddenly felt wobbly and almost fell down the stone steps. Luckily Yi Jing was there to prop me up.

I grabbed my chest. Cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

That's right, it was the nasty, palpitating sensation again!

Yi Jing helped me to sit down on the stone steps. Frowning, she asked me, "Why are you like this? Is it the same as it was this morning?"

I nodded, panting. "Last night, this morning on the way to school, this morning after flag-raising, and right now..."

I suddenly realized something so strange that it made my hair stand on end.

I looked around nervously, and without even thinking about it I gripped Yi Jing's hand tightly.

"What's wrong? Don't scare me!" said Yi Jing anxiously. "I'm going to run ahead and get Ah Lun and Xiao Mi!"

She shook my hand off, placed her backpack on the stairs, and left me alone.

Left behind an increasingly frightened me!

My thinking, which previously was muddled by the same pressure that kept affecting my heart, was now clear and sharp.

Every time the strange feeling came over me, it seemed to have a strange connection to the appearance of the old man...

A very unsettling connection.

I looked around carefully in all directions to see if he was anywhere nearby.

In the golden beauty of dusk, my consternation had condensed into a blueish anxiety in my heart. I panted because of the desolate pressure. I searched between the trees for the silhouette of the old man, not sure which would be more frightening, seeing him, or not.

Not there.

Not there.

Not there, either.

Over there? ... Not over there either.

Behind me ... also ... okay, not there either.

I let out a soft breath. Maybe I really did need to go see a doctor.

And then, just as I lowered my head, all the hairs on my body stood on end.

A numbing electricity vibrated through every pore in my body. A strong sense of uneasiness shot from the top of my skull down through my entire body. I lifted my head, and saw ...

On the tree directly above my head, wearing a green Tang suit, was the strange old man!

I let out a blood-curdling shriek: "Ahhhh!"

When I shouted, the old man's eyes transformed from sharp points to happy slivers.

"What are you doing! Don't come near me!" I shrieked, nearly tumbling down the stairs.

"The benevolent is invincible, his heart fears not," he said. The long tree branch upon which he stood swayed gently in the wind.

"Go away!" I called out hysterically. "Go!"

The old man called out loudly as well, "The benevolent is invincible, his heart fears not!"

The old man's shout resonated like a bell, vibrating in my ears until they began to burn.

"What's wrong?" Ah Lun dashed up the stairs carrying his backpack, followed by Xiao Mi and Yi Jing. I pointed at the old...

The old man?

I pointed at a bare tree branch.

It swayed gently.

"Are you dying?" Ah Lun felt my forehead.

I stared stupidly at the lifeless tree branch and then looked around frustratedly. There was no sign of the old man.

"I must be hallucinating," I muttered to myself.

Yi Jing gasped for breath, looking at me suspiciously.

"I ... I think I'm fine," running my hand through my hair.

The old man standing on the tree branch ...

Was it a hallucination?

"Your body is fine, you just haven't been getting enough sleep," said the doctor, looking at the X-ray.

"Thank you." I picked up my backpack.

"Go home and go to sleep for me." Yi Jing smacked my head lightly.

I stood in front of the book store, not sure if I should go in.

Go home, be greeted by disgusting cigarette smoke and then submerged in ice-cold warmth.

Not go home, and run the risk of being frightened to death by the old man.

I kicked a pebble, thinking about Yi Jing's warning.

"Starting at six, I'm going to call your house every other hour to see if you're there," she had said solemnly. "Don't forget our bet over next month's test. You stay at home for me and study. I don't want to have an unfair advantage."

I had no choice but to hoist up my backpack and ride my bicycle home.

As I thought more and more about Yi Jing's repeated warnings, I couldn't help but smile.

"Auntie Wang [35] left already. There's food on the table, heat it up yourself and eat. Peng! [36]"

Mom slapped down a Mahjong tile, and continued to bury her face in the game.

"Ok." I quickly ate my cheerless dinner, and before my dad's loser friends had all arrived, snuck off to my room.

When you talk about children without warm families, you're talking about me.

I stared at the phone. It was 5:58.

I stared at the phone, waiting for a minute to go by.

And then I waited for another minute.

**

[35] It's not clear who this is. I assume it's their 阿姨 maid or something.

If it becomes important later I will clarify at the time.

[36] This is something that you say when playing Mahjong

A terrifying annoyance (4)

I stared for another minute.

Finally, the phone rang.

"Hello, is Shao Yuan there?" It was Yi Jing's voice.

"You're one minute late." I collapsed onto the bed.

"That's because our clocks are different," she said. Good point.

"I'm going to start studying." I crossed one leg over the other.

"Okay. Bye, then" said Yi Jing quickly.

We hung up at the same time, no procrastination.

I couldn't help but smile. I looked at the spinning blades of the electric fan, and I felt a strange feeling in my heart... How do the authors of love stories come up with those fascinating and emotionally philosophical conversations?

I don't think Yi Jing and I would ever have the kind of conversations they have in love stories.

I couldn't figure it out. Did those ultra sappy conversations actually occur in real life? Wouldn't it be really weird and awkward?

Maybe in this story, I just didn't play a romantic role. Or, even more likely, this story just wasn't a love story. And even more probable, Yi Jing and I had nothing romantic at all between us, so we would never have those kinds of dreamy conversations.

I laid down on the bed and yawned.

At the moment, I just wanted to sleep. But suddenly, my entire body felt as if it had been dropped into a giant freezer and was being stabbed all over by coldness.

The familiar pressure had reappeared, and had redoubled!

I leapt up like lightning and sat on my pillow, panic-stricken. I stared wide-eyed at the window.

I understood.

In the twinkling of an eye, I understood.

This was an absolute, out-and-out horror story.

Sadly, in this story I played a supporting role, someone who gets killed.

And the villain, the lead character of the horror story, was currently stuck to my window, his body adhering to the glass, staring at me. I was so frightened, it seemed my internal organs had burst.

Part 2

That year, I was 13 years old, an inauspicious age. That year, Chang Yu-sheng was still alive, Dave Wong was popular, and Fang Jiwei was still the Sweetheart of the Military. Their songs filled my room every day. That year, I met him. That year, kung fu.

Old Man (1)

“Ahhh—” I screamed. I use all the power in my body to scream.

The old man stared at me from outside the window. He tilted his head, staring at his prey up and down.

I don't know when I regained my composure, but by the time I finished my pointless screaming, I had two diabolo sticks [37] in my hands.

“What are you doing?!” I rebuked. “Why are you hanging outside my window!?” He seemed old but full of vigour. And it seemed as if he had used no climbing tools whatsoever to ascend to the third floor of our house.

The old man said nothing. He just opened his mouth and breathed onto the window, forming some fog. And then he wrote five characters onto the window with his finger: “Study martial arts with me.”

I shook my head. At that moment, my heart was filled with an absolute

sense of abomination.

How could there be such an obstinate weirdo!

I picked up the phone and dialled 110 [38].

“Hello? I’m sorry, I need to report a situation. My house is located at #5 Yongle Street [39]. There’s a weird person who climbed up to the third floor window of our house, like Spider-man. I think he’s planning to rob us. Could you please send someone over? Mm-hmm. No, no I’m not joking. Please hurry.”

I looked at the old man hanging to the window and hung up the phone.

He stared at me eagerly. I’m not sure exactly when, but the strange feeling of pressure was gone.

Because of my phone call, the old man would probably be taken to the police station and interrogated, then charged and sent to prison for a few months. Considering his ridiculous crazy condition, he would definitely be bullied by other prisoners.

Wouldn’t that be just too ruthless? I asked myself.

But, he had really gone too far, hangin outside my window and scaring me like this. If I had been studying at my desk at the foot of my bed (which was right next to the window) [40], when I saw him ,my heart might have stopped in fright.

I was almost completely convinced that if I didn't report him to the police this time, he would intensify his efforts to frighten me. So I stuck to my decision.

"Ding dong."

I sped to open the door and dash downstairs. Two police officers stood in the entry hall.

"Your son reported that someone climbed up to your third floor window," said one of the policemen. "We're here to have a look."

Dad was shocked for a moment. "No," he said. "He must have just been bored and decided to make a fake emergency call for fun!"

Uncle Wang slapped his fat belly and laughed. "Of course, of course! Yuan Zai is a naughty kid. Sorry to trouble you, officers. Why don't you have some tea with us!"

"It's my bedroom window!" I yelled angrily. "Officer, come with me, quickly!"

The policemen looked at each other, then slipped off their shoes, unholstered their guns, and followed me up stairs. My dad and his four friends followed curiously.

I opened the bedroom door and pointed outside the window toward...

Weird.

Nobody was there?

"He was right here!" I shouted. "I was so scared I screamed! Didn't you hear?"

"Scream?" said Dad suspiciously. "What scream?"

My fists clenched into balls. I was so mad I couldn't speak.

Uncle Chen, standing off to the side, laughed. "Yuan Zai has always been mischievous like this, ever since he was young. Officers, please don't be upset. Let's go downstairs and have a cup of tea."

The policemen looked at me coldly. "If you make a fake emergency call ever again, we'll lock you up!"

With that, they followed Dad and the others downstairs.

Furious, I threw the phone onto the bed and slammed the door.

I looked out the window, trying to control my fury.

But what was I actually angry at? At this point, I wasn't angry at the crazy old man any more.

I was angry at those rotten adults, so busy with their mindless chatting that they hadn't heard me scream.

I sat indignantly on the bed, picked up the phone and punched some numbers in.

"Hello, is Yi Jing there?" I tried to calm myself down.

"It's not even 7:00 yet, is it?" It was Yi Jing's voice. "You have something to report?"

I looked into the empty darkness outside the window and said, "The old man came for me again just now."

"What?" she said, amazed. "He knows where you live? You told him?"

I ground my teeth. "No, of course not! He must be stalking me. And guess how he came after me?"

Yi Jing hesitated for a moment and then said, "Considering that you're asking, I'm going to guess he probably didn't knock or ring the doorbell?"

"Right."

"Did he climb out of your backpack?" Yi Jing said, her voice quite sincere.

"..." I was speechless.

"Hiding in the closet?" she said quietly.

"He was hanging outside my window, staring at me with eyes like a dead fish's." I sighed.

"Ah?" she said, seemingly at a loss. "Isn't your bedroom on the third floor?"

"That's what made it even more terrifying!" I said angrily. "Seeing his face hanging there on the glass was more than enough to give me nightmares for a week."

"Then what. Did he fall down?" she asked worriedly.

"I don't think so, he seems really agile. After I called the police, he ran off." As I spoke, I couldn't help but think of the oily faces of my dad's friends.

"Yeah, I hope so," said Yi Jing. "That would be much better than if he slipped and fell down."

"Yeah, I hope so too. But every time I see him my whole body feels weird. I don't know what's going on. I have such bad luck." And then I told her about the frightening incident that had occurred after school.

Yi Jing listened quietly. You would think she might criticize me for talking crap, but she didn't.

"Now that you've told me all this... I seems like the old man isn't going to leave you alone. Who knows, maybe he cast some kind of spell on you or something? Or maybe he has a straw figurine of you that he pricks with needles?" Hearing Yi Jing so earnestly make deductions about me didn't make me feel comfortable at all.

I wasn't merely uncomfortable, I began shaking coldly.

"Why don't you say something? Did I scare you?" she asked apologetically.

"N-n... no." I shrank backwards on my bed, my skin covered with goosebumps.

I gripped the telephone tightly, suddenly feeling as if I had slipped into some kind of trance.

Why would I be gripping the phone like this?

**

[37] I'd never seen or heard of the diabolo before I came to China, but here, and in Taiwan too I assume, it's a pretty common toy
<http://goo.gl/lGC6m>

[38] This is the Taiwan emergency telephone number.

[39] The street is named after the Yongle Emperor, third of the Ming Emperors <http://goo.gl/FDo78>

[40] This part I added completely. He doesn't say anything about where the desk is located, and I feel like in English it's weird without the clarification. I think in Chinese it is implied that the desk is close to the window, but in English it really isn't. Feel free to hit me with other opinions.

Old Man (2)

Why did the phone have cold sweat on it?

Why ... why did I not dare to lift my head?

There were two reasons.

The first reason lay hidden within my quivering heartbeat.

The second reason was because I didn't dare to look up at ...

The window.

The window.

I gnawed my lip and slowly lifted my head. I looked out of the window into the inky blackness.

There was a withered old face, pressed up against the glass, and two mesmerising eyes, looking at me.

Looking at me.

"Waahhh—" I wanted to scream.

But I didn't. I didn't have the energy to open my mouth and scream.

The only thing I could do was to grip the telephone tightly.

I couldn't even have the courage to close my eyes and avoid the twisted face hanging from the glass.

"Why aren't you talking?" asked Yi Jing suspiciously.

"I..." My eyes couldn't move from the old man's face.

"Is your body feeling weird again?" Yi Jing seemed concerned.

"Yeah," I said. The old man's eyes remained motionless.

"So you mean...?" Her train of thought moved quickly.

"Yeah," I said faintly. I thought I could see the old man's pupils constricting rapidly.

"How frightening! I'll call the police for you!" Yi Jing immediately hung up the phone.

At the moment, my mind was very clear.

Actually, what about the old man was frightening?

He was an old man, that's all.

Even though he looked a bit odd, and seemed to be stalking me and scaring me... yet, he was an old man in the twilight of his life, that's all!

The strange thing was, even though my mind was working normally, it was difficult to shake off the inexplicable dread. And my heart would not stop its furious beating.

Was it instinct?

If so, what were my instincts trying to tell me?

Should I be afraid?

The old man once again breathed onto the window.

And yet again he wrote into the fog.

"Beg me to be your master." The characters were written backwards.

I huddled on the bed, shaking my head.

The old man's face had a look of doubt on it, as if he couldn't understand how I felt.

Separated by the third floor glass window: a demented old man and a youth whose heart would soon explode, looking at each other.

Facing off.

The doorbell rang.

It must be the police checking in, I thought.

This time, I wouldn't let the old men escape.

I stared at him, trying to squeeze out a friendly smile.

From downstairs came the sound of voices talking loudly. It seemed like the stupid adults were kicking up a row, daring to judge the moral quality of a certain middle school student.

It didn't matter. Soon the truth would be revealed.

I quietly waited for the sound of knocking on my door, waiting to see the shocked expressions on the faces of the stupid adults, along with their profuse apologies.

The old man continued to hang motionless from the glass.

And my heart continued to beat wildly.

Perhaps because of the atmosphere, it felt like time was moving slowly, too slowly.

I guess this is what the expression “a watched pot never boils” means [41]. But why were the stupid adults so slow to come save me?

Let me ask you, what do you think the fossilised, ancient, infallible, indifferent adults did?

I could hear the din downstairs slowly dying down.

I bet my dad had managed to send them away.

I knew that I had been betrayed by my family again.

“Knock knock knock knock! Knock knock knock knock!”

It was the door knock I had been expecting!

I tried to suppress the joy in my heart. I slowly walked toward the sound of knocking, careful to prevent the old man from escaping.

I opened the door. It was mom.

“Mom, look! There’s a weird old man hanging from the window! He scared me to death!” I pointed at the glass. This time, the old man just stared at me blankly. He didn’t dash away like lightning.

Her body reeked of smoke and alcohol. Eyes glazed, she casually stuffed a thousand yuan worth of cash into my hand. "I just won a bunch," she said. "Go buy something you like, or save it..."

I grabbed her hand. "Mom," I said urgently, "look at the window! There's a person hanging outside!"

She tilted her head, facing the window. "Oh," she said. And then, she turned around and staggered back downstairs.

Just like that, she went downstairs.

A feeling of grief completely overwhelmed my fear. I slowly closed the door.

I was left behind, alone.

I sat down, looking at my only company, the old man.

Yes, my company.

After being abandoned by my family, my heart was dark and cold. Even if I died, so what?

It looked like the old man could see my sorrowful mood. And then his eyes changed from those of a dead fish's, to the way an old man's eyes should look.

I'm not sure when or why, but my previously wildly beating heart had quieted.

The old man started breathing on the glass again, and then wrote: "Don't be sad."

I shook my head dispiritedly.

Lacking all rhyme or reason, the old man and I stared at each other. And thus began a whole night of silent face-off.

I spent the whole night underneath the soulful eyes of the old man.

The old man was there with me, hanging from the glass.

**

[41] The Chinese expression translated literally is "one day seems like a year." The closest idiomatic English expression I could think of was "a watched pot never boils." Feel free to chip in with opinions.

A room without walls (1)

"The whole night?"

"At least two thirds, or maybe three fourths. I did sleep eventually."

"And your alarm woke you up?"

"Yeah. When I woke up I was covered with a blanket."

"Oh?" asked Yi Jing disbelievingly. Her jaw had dropped, her chopsticks hovering above her stewed egg [42].

I looked at Ah Lun, Ah Yi, and Xiao Mi. Then I continued, "It wasn't my family who put the blanket on me, it was the old man."

"Are you sure?" Ah Lun said, munching on the boxed meal Xiao Mi had brought him. "He broke a hole in the glass and went in?"

"I guess you could say that." I looked at Yi Jing.

"You guess you can say that?" Xiao Mi always payed attention closely to everything. "So what you're saying is that he didn't actually break a hole the glass and go in."

"There wasn't a hole broken in the glass. The entire glass pane was removed and shattered. Then the pieces were gathered up into a page

ripped from my calendar, and thrown into the trashcan."

"Then the glass was broken," said Ah Yi, mashing up his stewed egg.

"No. If someone had broken the glass, I would definitely have woken up. Especially theft-resistant glass like mine." I think my expression must have been very strange.

"Is the old man some kind of monster?" said Xiao Mi.

"Please, a monster? If he was a monster, Ah Yi could never have beaten him."

Ah Yi snorted. "I can beat monsters too."

Yi Jing looked me over. "You must not have gone to sleep until nearly dawn. You barely slept! Aren't you tired? How come I didn't see you yawn all morning?"

Xiao Mi giggled and said, "How can you be so sure he didn't? Were you watching Shao Yuan the entire class?"

Yi Jing's face probably went completely red, but I didn't dare to look at her. "Exactly," I said quickly. "I've been energetic all day. My eyes weren't dry at all, and during the national anthem I sang extra loud."

Ah Yi tilted his head. "Wow, great! Are you possessed or something?"

Ah Lun licked his meal box clean. Sucking on the last bits of food in his mouth, he said, "You're fine, that's the important thing. If it really was the old man who put the blanket on you, then it means he shattered the glass, went into the room, and covered you with the blanket. He didn't kill you, so he must not have any ill intentions."

Xiao Mi nodded and said, "Yeah. If he keeps hiding outside of your window and scaring you, then you can just call Ah Yi. He'll go over and help."

"Right," said Ah Yi complacently. "I'm usually not busy."

I didn't respond.

I didn't want to cause any problems for the old man.

Maybe the old man had decided to accompany me because my family had forsaken me and I was lonely.

"If the old man scares you again, you call me," said Yi Jing earnestly.

"Thanks," I laughed.

On the way home after class, I looked closely for any sign of the old man. Maybe he was waiting for me somewhere.

"Your family is so rich, why haven't you bought a Nintendo?" Yi Jing kicked a pebble.

"I think wuxia novels are much more interesting," I replied. Although, I wasn't necessarily against buying a Nintendo.

If Yi Jing wanted to play it.

"You can finish a novel in a day." Yi Jing frowned. "Ah Yi, don't walk up in front smoking, it stinks to death."

Ah Yi looked as if he couldn't care less.

"You need to cut your hair," I said. "There's an inspection tomorrow at flag-raising."

Ah Yi snorted, tossing his cigarette butt onto the stairs. "But really, you should buy a Nintendo. It would save me some money from going to the mall to play Mario Brothers. I could just go to your house."

I said nothing, but I rubbed the cash in my pocket. The money mom had given me last night.

That night, I went home with a Nintendo. My father wasn't there when I entered, and neither was his gang of loser friends. I didn't hear mother and her Mahjong friends.

But I could hear sounds coming from mother's room.

The sound of moaning.

"The kid won't be home so soon..." said Mom quietly.

Thanks to Ah Yi's timely insights into sexual matters, I wasn't a completely ignorant when it came to sex.

"Now this is a home," I thought to myself, tiptoeing past mom's room and quietly climbing the stairs.

I entered my room and put the Nintendo on the bed, laughing at myself for being so stupid.

What an idiot! My bedroom didn't have a television. How the hell could I play it?

I remembered that in the storage room was a brand new television we had won in a raffle. I decided to go down and grab it.

I opened the door, and then stood at the corner of the staircase, dumbfounded.

I saw Uncle Wang, walking out of mom's bedroom, tightening his pants.

My fists....

Clenched.

Mom followed him lethargically, messing with her hair.

My breathing stopped, my heart pounded in my chest.

“When is the next time we can heh heh ...” Uncle Wang’s dirty hand kneaded mom’s backside.

“Can do what? Go, go. Yuan Zai will be back soon...” Mom brushed aside Uncle Wang’s dirty hand flippantly.

Smiling, Uncle Wang put on his shoes in the entry hall.

Watching this unbelievable, disgusting scene, my heart was filled neither with sorrow nor anger.

There was only one word—

Kill.

Mom went into the main room to watch television, and I went back to my room, dumbfounded.

I couldn’t spit out a single word, nor emit a single noise.

My eyes couldn’t even fill with tears [43]. Most likely the veins in the whites of my eyes were bulging.

This was the most humiliating moment in my entire life.

My mom, Uncle Wang...

Bastard!

My knuckles made cracking sounds, and the blood in my fingers boiled.

[42] This is a really common type of Chinese food. Basically, you boil eggs, then stew, marinate and/or soak them in spices and liquid. Yum!
<http://goo.gl/JekORG>

[43] Now that is a true hero! <http://goo.gl/wDLlu9>

A room without walls (2)

Cold wind blew in through the window. I looked at the blood colored setting sun.

"I'm going to kill you."

I let out a harrumph and slapped my palm onto the table. Bang.

A strange, deep sound rang out. Then, the table collapsed.

Without a sound, the four legs of the table broke into pieces.

On the surface of the table a ragged palm print, the edges steaming slightly.

Roiling waves of surprise washed away my furious hatred, which quickly changed into panicked fear.

I was mad, that's right!

But the table... It was only a wood table, and I had just bought it a year ago!

"Why am I so angry?!" I muttered to myself, squatting down and looking at the broken ends of the table legs, where the used to connect to the table.

"It is not an aura of anger, it is an aura of death."

I was flabbergasted.

The voice of the old man?

I looked around my small room cautiously.

Was I hearing things?

"It is an aura of death!"

"Where are you?" I said indignantly. Right now my heart had no place for good-for-nothing emotions like dread.

"The closet."

In my room, the only place where someone could hide would be in the closet or under the bed.

The closet slowly opened.

The old man slowly appeared from within the darkness, walking out oh so slowly.

"Why are you hiding in there?" I asked, even though it was pointless to ask.

"Because the only places I can fit in your bedroom are the closet or under the bed!" said the old man speciously.

"How long do you plan to scare me and bother me and annoy me?" I asked coldly.

When some people encounter certain situations, situations that constitute huge reversals in life, they will completely change.

I stood on a precipice in life, standing above the winds of hell.

Perhaps I would become a cold person, and in the future I could go around killing people to uphold justice.

"I did not scare you. I just want to teach you kung fu. All the kung fu I possess."

The old man looked at me cordially with his deep, mysterious eyes.

"There's no need," I said firmly, looking at him.

"Justice requires kung fu." Within the old man's eyes, tears glistened.

"Kung fu? I just destroyed a table with a single palm slap! And I still

need to study kung fu?" My patience with the old man was almost completely gone.

"Yes, you do! Afterwards, you will be able to level mountains and cut off rivers, root out the villains and protect the weak!" He placed his arms behind his back. The evening sun shone on his dark green Tang suit, its golden brilliance reflecting off of the wrinkles on his face.

"You smash a cliff and cut off a river!" I howled. I didn't care if mom heard. "I want to see! Chop down Bagua Mountain and I'll kneel to accept you as my master!"

"Well," said the old man, looking a little embarrassed. "I was speaking figuratively..."

"Beat it!" I shouted, pointing at the window.

The old man shook his head. "If this was a few years ago, I would not force you to accept me as master. But now ..."

With my palm, I slapped the wall next to the window as hard as I could, and shouted, "Knock this wall down! Knock it down and I'll accept you as my master! If you can't knock it down, then..."

The old man strode forward with one step. His right hand shot out with a strange motion, seemingly fast, and yet slow. He slapped his palm onto the wall.

"Then..." My voice dissipated into the air.

Dissipated into complete nothingness, into a complete, wall-less empty space.

My room was now missing a wall.

I couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of losing a wall. Not at all.

I could only stand there stupidly as the cold wind filled my room. If a room without a wall could still be called a room.

"Creak.... bang... crash!"

It seemed the wall had landed on my dad's car outside.

"Kneel!"

The old man slowly pulled back his hand, looking calm and composed and quite pleased with himself.

Perhaps I was just too scared. I couldn't bring myself to wake up from the surreal situation. I just stood there stupidly.

"True men stick to their word! Kneel! I will pass some skill on to you." He paced blissfully back and forth. "If you learn the art well, then forget about knocking down a single wall. If you want to knock down several walls, it will be no problem."

I tilted my head. "You ..." I said dumbly. "How did you do that?"

The old man was just opening his mouth when suddenly we heard the sound of mom rushing up the stairs. The old man jumped into the air, leaping out of the empty the gigantic empty hole. I dashed forward to look. The old man was already at the end of the alley, a tiny green dot.

"What happened?" mom cried out in alarm. "Your room!"

"I don't know. It was like this when I came back," I said dryly.

"When... when did you get back?" mom asked nervously.

"Just now." I pushed mom out of the door and locked it.

As far as I was concerned, mom was dead to me.

I had completely given up on this family.

I would rather live in a wall-less room.

Many years later, I would regret my childish decision.

Sometimes, people don't understand the truth about their own feelings. They suddenly get hurt, and then feel that the only choice they have is to give up in hopelessness. What they don't realize is that what truly can

hurt them the most is their own precious love. And because love is so precious, one should never give up, one should never run away.

By the time most people understand this truth, they have already lost their precious love.

Many years later, I wanted to go home.

It turned out, Dad did go to the mainland.

And yes, he went whoring. Then later, he passed on diseases to my mom, who in turn infected Uncle Wang.

As far as the wall that fell on my dad's Benz, it got taken away by a backhoe.

Mom wanted me to sleep in the living room, wanted to hire people to fix the wall. I refused.

"If you try to make me move to the living room, if you try to fix the wall, I'll run away," I said. I wore a sweater while studying in the cold wind.

"You ... Since when did you start using this tone on me!" said mom, shaking angrily.

"It's been a long time since you talked to me." I continued to work on my algebra.

"When your father gets back," she said angrily, "you..."

A room without walls (3)

"Go play your mahjong. If my room is like this, it's my business." I frowned.

"You're going to let the neighbours watch you sleep? It's already November! You'll catch cold!" She stared at me wide-eyed.

"If you don't get out, I'll jump out of this hole. Although," I said sarcastically, "you probably wouldn't notice I was gone for at least a month."

"What did you just say?!" Mom howled.

"I'll count to three and then I'm going to jump. One!" I put down my math book and walked over to the edge.

Mom was flabbergasted, but at least I was left alone.

Actually, this room was quite fitting.

A huge whole had been knocked out of it, just like my heart.

They both felt equally ice-cold.

It was all thanks to the old man's palm. My family was already falling apart, all he had to do was punch out a big hole and let me see the

outside world.

I stood in front of the hole, looking up at the crescent moon in the sky.

"Yi Jing probably isn't asleep yet, is she?" I looked at the telephone.

A figure appeared, tearing down the alley. It stepped onto my dad's Benz and then leaped up into the big hole.

The old man wearing his Tang suit.

Of course.

"Just who are you?" I felt no more shock or surprise. I just wanted to know where the old man came from.

He was covered with filth, but he definitely was not an ordinary person.

Ordinary people don't knock down walls.

"Your master," he said confidently, sucking in his cheeks.

"Yeah." I kneeled down.

This change in attitude wasn't just simply an "oath between true men." It was also the hope that an atomic bomb would be thrown onto my future prospects.

Correct. All the signs were clear. The old man standing in front of me really was equipped with incredible martial arts, just like Master Roshi [44] from Dragonball [45]. But in the society of Taiwan, where academic advancement was so important, becoming a disciple and studying martial arts, no matter how amazing the master was, would be a road filled with ridicule and derision. It was definitely an atomic bomb that would obliterate all future prospects. There is a saying that goes "you can produce outstanding achievements in any task." [46] Sadly that saying is a bunch of crap.

I kowtowed, tapping my head against the floor. It hurt a little bit.

Goodbye, family. Never mind. There was no need at all to say farewell to them.

I kowtowed a second time, banging my head more forcefully.

I was on a path of chaos, becoming the disciple of a lunatic master who was an expert of the martial world. This would surely leave my family hurt and sad. Great. No, they actually wouldn't care.

I kowtowed a third time, hard. I banged my head very hard.

My head felt a bit murky. It was good. In the future, I wouldn't be needing a clear head. I planned to live a dark and unclear life.

In the past, I had no personality.

In the future... I didn't need a future.

"Master," I said feebly.

The old man rubbed my head, and I could feel that his strong hand was trembling.

He was crying.

1986.

That year, I was 13 years old, an inauspicious age.

That year, Chang Yu-sheng was still alive, Dave Wong was popular, and Fang Jiwei was still the Sweetheart of the Military.

Their songs filled my room every day.

That year, I met him.

That year, kung fu.

"From today on, you are my eldest disciple. You are now a member of the Heaven Reaching Sect."

“Oh? Heaven Reaching Sect?”

“Very powerful!”

“Yes, master.”

Glittering moonlight, a large hole.

An old man, a middle-school student.

The beginning of a grand, although somewhat hard to classify, story.

**

[44] Master Roshi, also known as Kame-Sennin or Muten-Rōshi, is the old guy in Dragonball who wears a turtle shell on his back

<http://goo.gl/PPsAAY>

[45] I’m sure everyone knows Dragonball... <http://goo.gl/oF5Wu>

[46] This is a relatively common Chinese saying. It literally means “any profession can produce a Zhuangyuan.” The Zhuangyuan was the title you got for placing first in the national imperial examinations of ancient China. Remember in Little Li’s Flying Dagger, Li Xunhuan is also known as Li Tanhua? Tanhua was the title of the person who placed third in the examinations.

Becoming a disciple (1)

"Let us begin the first lesson! Let me think, the first thing I will teach you..." The old man sat down on the floor cross-legged, losing himself in thought.

"Hold on a moment. Why did you pick me to be your disciple?" I also sat cross-legged, not to train, but to talk.

"What do you mean I picked you? You begged me!" said the old man with a hint of annoyance.

I nodded. After all, I had no personality.

"Master, when I begged you to accept me as your disciple, how come you agreed so quickly?" I asked.

I was really curious why a lunatic had taken notice of me.

After all, knowing martial arts didn't preclude one from being a lunatic.

Master muttered to himself for a moment, then said, "After you went through my three tests, I found that you possessed much potential. Not like me when I was young. So when you begged me, I could not allow myself to be arrogant and unapproachable."

"Were you testing my compassion?" I asked doubtfully. "Or my patience? Or did you scare me all day to test the condition of my heart? If

I didn't die from fright, then I was qualified?"

Master nodded and said, "All correct. But the most important test was the one in which you showed the most potential. When studying martial arts, one must be very particular when it comes to natural gifts in this area."

I didn't understand, which was frustrating.

Master looked at me and said, "You don't understand?"

I was about to open my mouth when I caught sight of Master's eyes, staring at me with blazing fury. I didn't know why, but all the hair on my body suddenly stood on end. My heart began pounding, and pearl-like drops of cold sweat broke out on my forehead.

"Determining aptitude is not about looking at muscles or physique. It is about carefully observing a person's instincts." Master went on earnestly: "A type of instinct hidden deeply within instinct. Awareness of auras of death. The gift of being able to sense danger. Only by being able to understand danger can one surpass it."

Master smiled. The indescribable pressure on my heart suddenly vanished.

It turned out that Master had been using an aura of death to test out my ability to react to danger.

Master continued, "First I will teach you basic Tu Na breathing

techniques [47]. Listen to me while you practice. Our Heaven Reaching Sect once shook the martial world. While Tu Na breathing is a fundamental and common art, the specific technique is very unique. The differences in the martial arts of the various clans and sects stem from differences in their foundational breathing technique.”

He told me that I could not reveal to anyone the technique of the Heavenly Reaching Sect’s Tu Na breathing skill. Martial arts are not something that just anyone can study. Afterwards, Master would repeatedly remind me of this.

“That night it was truly our destiny to meet in the book store, you and me, master and disciple. You were there reading historical records of the martial world, and I probingly recommended some records that I feel are quite good. And you...” The words flowed from Master’s mouth.

“Master,” I said dryly, “I was reading wuxia novels, not historical records!”

“Let me tell you a secret. Actually, they are not all just novels. Some are, some are not. Some are nonsensical chatter, like Legend of the Swordsman from Mount Zu. Others are actually true parables from the martial world. And some people from them have connections to the forefathers of our Heaven Reaching Sect. For example, the great hero Linghu Chong [48] from Smiling Proud Wanderer. His Nine Whips of Dugu once fell in defeat under one of our Heavenly Reaching Sect forefathers’ sword skill...” Master said this part with great gusto. [49]

I couldn’t help but say, “Linghu Chong used the Nine Swords of Dugu [50]! It was a sword technique!” I’d said all along that Master was crazy.

Master smacked my head lightly and said, "That was a fabrication by later generations, which is not very respectful to the ancestors. How could Linghu Chong's Nine Whips of Dugu, a whip technique that shook the Northern Frontier, be a sword technique? It's laughable, laughable!"

"What do you mean it shook the Northern Frontier?" As soon as the words came out of my mouth I regretted it. Why was I taking this all so seriously?

"When Great Hero Linghu took his Divine Condor [51] far to the Northern Frontier to fight a duel with 'Shining Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng," Master said unhesitatingly, "what he used was this unpredictable whip technique."

Northern Shining Hunchback Mu Gaofeng [52]? Where the **** did that bastard rank? [53]

Wait, wait. Divine Condor?

"Linghu Chong's Divine Condor... uh, how big was it?" I asked gingerly.

"Huge," Master exclaimed. "At least two heads taller than you!"

"And the condor ... where did it come from? It wasn't on loan from Yang Guo [54], was it?" My suspicions currently exceeded my impulse to laugh.

"Of course not. It was raised by Linghu Chong. Great Hero Linghu was a

patient man, it really fills people with a feeling of veneration.”

“So, was Yang Guo from Return of the Condor Heroes [55] also a real person?” I could not hold back from asking. What a weird old guy.

“Yes! His patience is even more admirable. The expression “grinding an iron club into a needle” aptly describes how he practiced diligently day and night with his Great Adamantine Sword. He practiced with it so much that the enormous sword was eventually whittled down into a needle. What patience! What pure internal strength!” Master said all of this in an exceedingly powerful and unconstrained tone.

I could not hold back from laughing out loud. Really. I hadn’t laughed so loud in a long time.

My first night in exile from my family, and I suddenly found myself laughing uproariously.

“What are you laughing at? Is something funny?” Master looked a bit embarrassed, and his face filled with an awkward expression.

I looked at Master’s dirty face. It was filled with a warmth that seemed to have been missing for a long time.

“Nothing, I just think it’s really interesting. It’s very different from what I read.” I thought Master would rebuke me, but as it turns out his personality was very quirky.

“The details of history become lost, writings contain inaccuracies. These

things are unavoidable. But they do not affect our goal of pursuing martial arts. Our pursuit of profound and matchless kung fu is out of our desire to uphold justice." Master's hands rested lightly on his knees, and his sleeves fluttered lightly in the wind. "Hero Guo said it well," he continued earnestly. "A true hero fights for the country and the people."

I nodded.

I could not help but nod.

Master's earnest expression caused goosebumps to cover my body. I was quite moved.

It turns out this incoherent, crazy old man had the ability to move my heart.

What a wonderful old lunatic.

"A true hero..." repeated Master slowly.

Maybe it was just the feelings of the moment, but his expression at that time still moves me even down to this day.

"When I was reading the historical records of the martial world," I asked, "I was reading a good one, so that's why you decided to accept me?"

Master shook his head. "You were polite to me, which left me with a favorable impression. Then when I saw that you were so entranced with

the wuxia world, I came to believe that you might have some natural ability.”

**

[47] Tu Na is an ancient method of controlling breathing to accumulate energy. I found mention of it in a lot of articles, but couldn’t find an article specifically about it.

[48] Linghu Chong is one of my favorite wuxia characters!
<http://goo.gl/FyNnaZ>

[49] I significantly changed the grammar, word order, and sentence order of this paragraph to make it make sense in English.

[50] For anyone not very familiar with Jin Yong novels, Dugu Nine Swords is one of the most famous and fearsome sword arts in the novels.
<http://goo.gl/KeR9hk>

[51] This is funny because the Divine Condor belonged to Yang Guo, not Linghu Chong. <http://goo.gl/KiXIWE>

[52] Mu Gaofeng was a minor antagonist in Smiling Proud Wanderer. In the translation on the forum, his nickname is “Northern Hunchback.” But in Chinese there is an additional character that means bright or shining, so I added that in and changed it a bit.

[53] I believe he’s a bit derisive because by the time Linghu Chong learned the Dugu Nine Swords (or whips...? haha), Mu Gaofeng would not have been even close to his level.

[54] Yang Guo is perhaps one of the most famous protagonists in Jin Yong’s novels <http://goo.gl/dzdt>

[55] Return of the Condor Heroes is another of Jin Yong’s famous novels <http://goo.gl/vxiGRq>. You can read a translation here on the forums <http://goo.gl/6KoRvH>

Becoming a disciple (2)

Master continued, "So when you went home I followed you from a distance, and on the way, I shot toward you an aura of death, to see your reaction to danger. It was very good. I heard your footsteps become heavy and your breathing ragged. You have talent. So I decided to test you some more."

I nodded. Perhaps I really was naturally talented in this regard. After all, the constrictive feeling of dread had been quite real. No wonder every time Master appeared, my heart felt like it would explode.

Master tilted his head and said, "If you are unable to sense danger, it means you have no natural ability. How can you call yourself a hero if you are so clueless that you can't sense danger until your head has been removed? Who in the martial world would be willing to engage in a contest of martial arts with you then?" [56]

"It's a very practical issue," I responded.

"These past few years I have wandered Jianghu," continued Master. "I frequently projected an inimitable aura of death. In the end, almost no one had any reaction to it at all. An aura of death is shapeless and colorless, and will not hurt ordinary people. But martial arts masters frequently face danger. How could they lack awareness of auras of death? These years, people are used to comfort and pleasure. Martial arts have turned into a circus act, a sports activity. People have forgotten that they originally were used to protect one's life!"

"So," I said, "am I the first person you found who reacted to your aura of

death?"

"No," replied Master apologetically. "Last year I was in the Land of the Rising Sun [57]. In my travels I encountered a young man who was extremely sensitive to auras of death. But at the time, because of a variety of reasons, I got involved in a conflict with some men of the land of the Rising Sun. I was arrested by the police and locked up, and lost track of the child. Later, well, humph, how could a place like that keep your Master contained?"

I laughed and said, "That's too bad. It seems really boring to study martial arts alone. It would be great if you could find someone to be my fellow disciple. It would be much more interesting with two people."

Master nodded earnestly. "If there were two disciples, then it would definitely..."

He drifted into silence, contemplating.

I thought of Ah Yi, who loved to fight. "I have a classmate who's really interested in fighting. Master, what if you take him as a disciple?"

He frowned. "The one who hit me that time?"

I nodded. "You must have let him hit you, right? If you had struck him you would have hurt him."

I thought to myself: If master had even just tapped his palm onto Ah Yi's chest, he would have vomited out all the blood in his body.

Master scratched his hair. "Martial arts practitioners are forbidden from casually revealing their abilities. Our chivalry must be practiced in the shadows. Revealing our true bearing will also reveal our foundation and position. So in that situation, I could only bear the disgrace and take to my heels. In any case, that child is too violent and rude, and has no talent. Anyone who accepted him as a disciple would be completely lacking in wisdom. I will not accept him. Will not."

I didn't really care. But seeing Master constantly scratching himself, I couldn't help but suggest, "Master, why don't you shower? I'll take you there." I'm pretty sure that practicing martial arts doesn't help to protect against skin diseases.

Embarrassed, Master said, "I don't want to trouble you."

I shook my head, leading him out the door and down the stairs.

The bathroom was in the corner of the first floor.

Mom and some of her friends were playing Mahjong and watching a drama show at the same time.

Mrs. Li, her face smeared with so much rouge she looked like a clown from a Chinese opera, wrinkled her brow and said, "What's the strange smell?"

Mom and the others covered their noses, looking around, finally catching sight of me leading my filthy Master down the stairs.

"Ah?! Yuan Zai, how could you bring..." Mom was shocked.

Master stood next to me, not sure what to do.

I said, "My Master." [58]

Mom forced a crack of a smile onto her rigid and ill-tempered face. "You're Yuan Zai's teacher? Please, excuse me, I never thought you would pay a house call. I'm playing a game right now, it's really..."

Seeing Mom's attitude, Master changed, suddenly becoming extremely refined and courteous. "Your son is exceedingly gifted. To be his teacher is truly an honor. I will teach him well, and turn him into an indomitable true man. Madam truly need not worry."

Mom, Mrs. Li, Maid Ma, Auntie He, all stared open-mouthed.

"My master needs to take a shower." Without giving them any further explanation, I pulled Master toward the bathroom.

Mom had completely no clue how Master got into my bedroom, but was there any need for further explanation?

Master bowed with clasped hands and followed me to the bathroom. I gave him some shampoo and soap, as well as a set of clothes from Dad's room. Then I went back upstairs.

Before I left, I urged Master to shower for a bit longer, since he doesn't have many opportunities to do so.

About an hour later, after I was finished with my math and English homework, I heard Master's knock on the door.

It was the first time he ever knocked on my door.

"I'm used to my clothes," he said apologetically, "so..." He held Dad's clothes in his hand.

"No problem," I said, grabbing the clothes and rolling them up.

I looked at the freshly showered Master. Yeah, the secretions on his face were gone, and even though he still wore the old Tang suit, he had already been elevated from the level of a vagrant to that of a proper old man.

"Thank you," he said happily.

I gave a gentle smile.

I should be the one saying thank you.

After thinking about it, I realised that perhaps justice was something that really did need to be exercised. I sat down with Master, folding my legs the same way he did, and the first class began.

"First lesson. Tu Na Qi gathering, developing strength in the veins and tendons. Last night, I watched over you the whole night. After you went to sleep, I shattered your window and came in to help you develop your veins and tendons. I used gentle internal force to slowly cultivate your blood and Qi. Therefore, afterwards you ought to have been filled with energy and strength, and not feel exhaustion. Correct?"

I nodded. "Yeah. So that's what happened."

Master said, "Developing strength in your veins and tendons is the first step in learning profound internal martial arts. If you are able to constantly practice the techniques, the strength of your inner force channeling will be much greater. It is a major foundation skill. This evening you somehow generated an astonishing aura of death, which was your innate gift at work. When combined with the aid I provided last night to your breathing and circulation, you were able to destroy the table in your fury."

I gazed at my palms, considerably pleased with myself.

**

[56] Just a heads up that I rearranged this paragraph a bit to make sense in English. The original sentence and word order doesn't quite conform to English syntax and logic.

[57] He uses an ancient and literary word that means Japan. So I decided to try to use the most literary and ancient expression in English that I could think of for it. (This is the same word used to describe the origin of the bathing facilities in Zhuo Donglai's special room <http://goo.gl/rWgEjk>)

[58] The word for "Master" in Chinese is not quite the same as in English. It is more common and somewhat less formal sometimes. For example, in a lot of parts of China it's common to address taxi drivers with this word, or perhaps other professional working men. Also, generally speaking, it means teacher. So in the Western English-speaking world, for a kid to say that some old guy is his "Master," would sound really strange, but not so much in Chinese I think.

Becoming a disciple (3)

Master knocked my head lightly. "Do not be too full of yourself. Right now you have no aura of death; your veins and arteries have no significant growth. You are just like any other person. If you want to carve out permanent mastery, you must continue to practice this first lesson day and night."

I believed Master, so I carefully listened and watched as he explained and acted out the martial philosophies.

The first lesson wasn't fluff. At first, I was completely unable to visualize the way blood and Qi flowed through the body, and even further unable to understand the profound mysteries of how to control it.

"Next, it will move from Flying Dragon point to Perching Tiger point. Then from this radial artery position, it will disperse to the Major Nine Mountains artery."

I couldn't stop myself from touching Master's "Flying Dragon point." "This is Central Temple point?" I asked. "All the wuxia novels call it Chest Center point." [59]

Master twisted my ear. "Use your brain to think for a moment. If the records of the martial world were all real, then the streets would be filled with martial arts masters! Some profound secrets cannot be randomly written down in books at the book store. Chest Center point? No, no, no. This is the one and only Flying Dragon point, the first of the body's Ten Great Acupuncture Points."

I felt a little confused and uneasy.

Master's martial arts were extremely powerful, that was absolutely true.

But his head was muddled. That was also without a doubt.

Using master's technique to circulate Qi through the acupuncture points could be very dangerous. Flying Dragon point? What kind of lamebrain name was that? Kooky! More like 10 Great Lumps of Crap. To take the word of a lunatic at straight value might lead me to practice until I had a brain hemorrhage.

"Why are you daydreaming? Did I say too much?" Master paused. "First lead your Qi to the Zebra point above your navel, then I'll continue."

I shook my head and said, "This is hard. Let's wait until after the monthly test to study."

Master started. "What? Regardless of anything, you must forge ahead vigorously and consistently with your kung fu. Otherwise, how can you become the master of the generation?"

"Master," I said helplessly, "I'm happy to be even just 1% as powerful as you."

Master's face changed color. "Why?"

A little scared, I carefully said, "It's good enough to just have a healthy body, and not worry about getting bullied."

Master grabbed the bookshelf, gripping the corner between his finger and thumb. "You are a student! The student must surpass the master! At the very least you should be able to defeat me single-handedly." [60]

That scared me. "I'll work hard," I said quickly.

Master grasped my shoulder and, in a reprimanding tone, said, "Swear it!"

I was really worried Master would rip my shoulder muscle in two, so I hurriedly said, "I swear that I will be more powerful than Master!"

He released me and said, "I don't want to threaten you or force you. It's merely that justice requires extremely powerful martial arts."

I nodded vigorously. Master could see that I was afraid. "Fear not," he said. "First I will help you to experience the feeling of Qi flowing and rushing through the various locations within your veins and tendons. You will become accustomed to it eventually."

Master sat behind me cross-legged and placed his right hand on between my shoulders. I immediately felt something adhering to my back, like a ball of fire, warm and gentle.

"Relax, close your eyes, and concentrate," continued Master. "This ball of fire is my inner force. In a moment, it will begin to flow through your

veins and arteries.”

I felt the ball of fire slowly moving toward the Celestial Gathering [61] point at the back of my shoulder (Master called it the True Man point.) I was quite surprised. Next the fireball moved down toward the Life Gate point [62] (Master said this was the second of the body’s Ten Great Acupuncture Points, Frigid Residence point). It felt really good.

Master’s hand did not follow the movement of the fireball. He used a very strange gesture to control the inner force. I recalled what master had just instructed. At the moment, regardless of how strange the names of the acupuncture points, the warm flow of the inner force proved true everything Master had said.

The feel of the flowing Qi was like that of a boiling hot snake, boring smoothly through one acupuncture point after another, from one artery to the next, each feeling different from the previous.

“Next, it will arrive at Flying Dragon point. This is a very important acupuncture point.” Master continued, “After that, it will infuse into Perching Tiger point, which will be very shocking. Do not be frightened!”

I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to open my mouth or not. The fireball had already condensed in my Chest Central point, right, Flying Dragon point, and my chest was filled with a feeling of pressure. The surging Qi boiled in the center of my chest, and then, I could not prevent myself from calling out!

“Ahhh—”

I shouted out happily. It was simply impossible to resist the vigorous feeling. The inner force surged from Flying Dragon point into Perching Tiger point. Every part of my frame felt completely revitalized.

"Good, very good! The other night, I did not dare to wake you, so I only slightly stimulated your acupuncture points. Therefore you slept very deeply." Master continued, "Next, I will dispatch the inner force from the Major Nine Mountains artery to all of the acupuncture points in your whole body. This will constitute a complete circulation of acupuncture point development, very beneficial."

Master's inner force gradually spread out throughout my entire body.

"Do you want to try out a peerless martial art?"

"Yes!"

A new type of inner force, a huge ball of fire, once again clamped onto my back. This version was much much larger than the previous one. Master said, "I will impart to you a universe-shocking lost art of the martial world, the Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand!"

The fireball shot into the Celestial Spring point on my right arm, then to Marsh at the Bend, Spirit Gate, Intermediary Courier, Inner Pass, Great Mound, and finally to the Palace of Toil in the middle of my palm and Central Hub point at the tip of my finger. [63] If you translate that into Master's patented terminology, it would be Nighttime Song, Nine Fragments, Ox Breath, Flat Ring, Seedling Chestnut, Guarding Flank and finally to Ascending Tide in the middle of the palm and Shifting Heaven on the fingertip.

I couldn't help but stretch my arms out straight. It felt very natural.

"Push down anywhere." Master's voice was filled with satisfaction. His hand left my back.

"It's not dangerous?" I asked. "Do I need to hit hard?"

"Just push the wall lightly," he replied brusely.

I pushed against the wall lightly, allowing the fireball transmitted to me by Master to vibrate my palm.

"Ahh!" I cried out lightly in alarm.

"Amazing, is it not? This is just one of the lost arts of our Heaven Reaching Sect." Master's voice was vigorous and filled with power.

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[59] I'm not sure how other translators usually translate this into English. Perhaps Dan Zhong is another common translation.

<http://goo.gl/eAN8n3>

[60] What he says here is based on a common Chinese idiom that is impossible to translate directly. The meaning of the phrase is "the student surpasses the teacher." Directly translated it is "blue comes from the indigo plant but is bluer than the plant itself." If you directly translate what Master says it would be something like, "You must be blue that

comes from the indigo plant! And even more so, you must surpass me.”

[61] Celestial Gathering point: <http://goo.gl/8z5NhY>

[62] Life Gate point: <http://goo.gl/ULBp7>

[63] Here are links to all the actual acupuncture points: Celestial Spring <http://goo.gl/QU1PYP>, Marsh at the Bend <http://goo.gl/WYBczY>, Spirit Gate <http://goo.gl/PzNocx>, Intermediary Courier <http://goo.gl/BHccgV>, Inner Pass <http://goo.gl/drNazJ>, Great Mound <http://goo.gl/H2ONFp>, Palace of Toil <http://goo.gl/zgzZLa>, Central Hub <http://goo.gl/mJJ7ak>.

Becoming a disciple (4)

My palm slowly sank into the concrete wall, bit by bit. The hard wall was just like a chunk of warm tofu.

"Experience for a moment how you will be in three years," said Master approvingly. "My natural ability was substandard. It took no less than five years of study for me to master the Wall Piercing Hand. With your talent, you should be able to achieve it in three."

I watched, astonished, as my hand pierced into the wall, leaving behind a deep handprint.

"I will be able to do this in three years?" I murmured, hardly able to believe it. "I'll become that powerful?"

"Bam!" shouted Master. The fireball rushed out of from the Ascending Tide and Shifting Heaven points of my hand. The wall began to steam, and then suddenly a huge section collapsed.

A section about the size of two hands.

"So awesome!" I exclaimed.

"Your body is not able to absorb the full extent of my inner force, so I infused you with about sixty to seventy percent. If it was your own power, it would be even more devastating."

I could not help but admire Master.

Thoroughly admire.

“Now, follow the basic Tu Na Qi gathering methods. Imagine the Qi passing through your acupuncture points. Slowly begin to practice.” Master’s hand left my back, and he stood up.

Following Master’s instructions, I began to practice.

Kung fu was now a part of me forever.

Even though the names of the acupuncture points in my body had been randomly changed by Master, it didn’t really matter.

I would become a matchless, first-class martial arts master, easily able to wipe out scum like Uncle Wang.

A first-class master.

Part 3

Hua Mao'er, the girl I loved, stood at the forest entrance outside the village, seeing me off. She sang a traditional love song from the Li Clan village, pledging her love. Ai... Hua Mao'er was a shy girl and her face flushed red as she sang. The lyrics explained that she would wait for me to return, and when I did, she would be mine! I watched her silhouette slowly fade away, but her song echoed in my ears. I rode on the back of a horse, my hand tightly gripping the sword that Master had given me. My two fellow disciples and I were devoted wholeheartedly to rooting out evil. But soon I would return to reunite with Hua Mao'er. [64]

A first glance at the way (1)

"You became the old man's disciple?" said Yi Jing, dumbfounded.

"Yeah. The whole thing is a bit complicated." My mood was a bit complicated as well.

"But... why? Did he force you?" Yi Jing's mouth hung open.

"No, it's not like that. Actually, Master is a good guy." I felt a bit disconcerted.

"Well..." Yi Jing was clearly confused.

"Here, take it. I don't have time to play it, I have to practice kung fu." I held out the Nintendo. Yi Jing's expression was one of complete shock.

"Don't be like this! You weirdo!" Even though she declined, I put the Nintendo into the drawer of her desk.

During class, I secretly practiced the Heaven Reaching internal arts.

I started with True Man point, gentle True Man point. Thankfully, Master had infused a little of his inner force into me.

"I can boost your natural potential by introducing some of my inner force into you, thus giving you a starting point to practice the inner methods of our Heaven Reaching internal arts. Practice one tiny step at a time, grow one bit at a time. Every night, I will continue to impart to you some of my high level inner force. Thusly, your martial arts can advance by leaps and bounds, and you can get twice the result with half the effort." That's what Master had said.

I placed my Chinese Language textbook onto the desk and slowly guided my Qi to Frigid Residence point, second of the 10 Great Acupuncture Points. It felt very good, there was nothing at all blocking the movement of the Qi.

I didn't close my eyes, but the characters the teacher was writing on the blackboard slowly grew blurry, and her shrill voice slowly faded away.

It seemed I had entered a sort of indistinct “calm.”

Forgiveness Receiving point, Hero Introduction point, Principal Goose point, yeah, completely successful. From one acupuncture point to the next until it finally reached the first of the body’s 10 Great Acupuncture points, Flying Dragon point. I focused my mind and relaxed my body. Then I pressed on to the finish, and the warm Qi surged to Perching Tiger point.

“Ahh—” I shouted uncontrollably. Immensely enjoyable!

With satisfaction, I pulled the Qi from Perching Dragon point to the Major Nine Mountains artery, then dispersed it throughout my body.

“Hahahahahahahahahahahahaha!”

Wild laughter erupted all around me. Huh?

I suddenly felt something poking into my back.

I turned, and saw Yi Jing stabbing me with her pen. I looked at her, no idea what was going on.

“Yan Shaoyuan!” cursed the exasperated Teacher. “What are you doing shouting out in class! Are you having a nightmare? Go stand in the back of the classroom!”

I rubbed my head and went to the back of the classroom with my book.

My gloating classmates clapped, and Ah Lun seemed to be laughing the hardest.

It was really embarrassing. I wanted to hide my glowing red face as I stood next to the trashcan.

And yet, my entire body felt warm and indescribably comfortable. Internal arts really were miraculous.

I recalled Master's words: "You must constantly practice your internal arts. You must constantly practice, and constantly control the flow of Qi in your body. After some time, your acupuncture points will naturally take control of your veins and arteries, and you unconsciously grow your inner force, whether you are walking around or sleeping."

So, I held my textbook, and once again slipped into the world of inner force.

"And so when this difficult character is used as a verb, although it is not an adjective, it..." the Chinese Language teacher's talking seemed to break into fragments.

"Ahh—" I shouted out in satisfaction.

"Yan Shaoyuan! Parallel squat, now!" The chalk in the teacher's hand snapped in two, and my classmates roared with laughter.

That day, I shouted out four times in Chinese Language class, eight times in English class, nine times in Geography class, twelve times in Art

class. I even shouted once when going to the bathroom.

It seemed progress with inner force was directly related to how many times you shout out.

But I was eventually sent to the Disciplinary Office, and given a lousy demerit.

Because I was usually so well-behaved, the instructor only planned to write me up a warning. But because I shouted out twice in the Disciplinary Office, he gave me the demerit after all.

I silently calculated. At this rate, my destiny would soon be expulsion, thanks to the constant shouting.

It really was annoying.

Actually, I had set aside my “give up on the future” idea. I still wanted to go to school.

Because Yi Jing was at school.

But I had also fallen in love with kung fu! And if I was going to practice kung fu, then I wanted to be like Master, an indomitable master!

Although, in my heart I actually thought: even being one tenth as powerful as master would still be good enough.

Later on when it was time to clean up, Yi Jing helped me pick up trash. She looked sad. "What's wrong with you?" she said. "In just one day you became a completely different person."

I didn't want to tell Yi Jing about my mom's adultery. Instead, I excitedly related all the details about Master knocking down my wall with his palm, and how he imbued me with inner force. I danced and gesticulated with joy as I told the story.

And then I noticed that Yi Jing was crying.

"You don't believe me?" I was shocked.

She didn't reply, she just bit her lip, clearly upset.

I didn't explain any further. I was more sad than her now.

Yi Jing finally opened her mouth. "Why are you crying?" she said, looking at me.

"Just forget about me." I turned and walked off.

It really hurt. I couldn't even breath.

As it turned out, not only did the useless adults disbelieve me, even Yi Jing, who had always supported me, was the same.

They were all the same.

A gaping hole. Moonlight.

An old man. A young boy.

"How did your martial arts practice go today?" said Master, looking me up and down. "Let me see."

My eyes wet, I said, "I'm coming to find out that practicing martial arts is really interesting."

Master nodded. "Judging from your complexion, it seems your inner force is already begging to develop. You really do have outstanding natural ability. You are a natural born martial talent."

"But," I said dejectedly, "My most trusted friend doesn't believe me."

Master let out a long sigh, and his eyes too became moist. "You are not the only one. Your Master is the same. No one believes him. That is how my life has passed."

I didn't understand. "Master, you are so powerful, how could people not believe?" I asked. "Can I bring my friend over to see your martial arts?"

Master glared at me and said, "Is kung fu used to entertain people? To put on a show?"

[64] I'm going to transliterate 花猫儿, although it's a nickname, not a given name. The first character means flower and the second means cat.

A first glance at the way (2)

"She's my very best friend," I pleaded. "Even if she's the only one who believes me, that's good enough!"

"The purpose of studying kung fu is not to gain approval. The purpose is justice. Because our purpose is to pursue justice, we are forced to conceal our true powers. Even if others look down upon us, we must treat it as mental test."

I wiped my tears away and said, "So even later, even if I master kung fu, I can't let anyone know?"

Master nodded.

I was a little sad. "Then, I'm going to look like an idiot for my whole life?"

Master nodded.

I knew there was no point in asking, because Master himself was a grim example.

I was a little angry. "Then what's the point of studying kung fu at all?!" I exclaimed.

Master gripped my shoulders tightly. "Son," he said sincerely, "you will understand!"

"I don't understand!" I said loudly. "Bad guys nowadays use guns. What's the point of learning kung fu?!"

Master's hands gripped me firmly. "You will understand!" he said tenderly. "When the time comes, you will instinctively know that you should reveal your kung fu."

I glared at Master angrily.

"There is something in the world called justice." Master's face suddenly seemed much older. In a hoarse voice, he said, "It dwells in the depths of your soul, and will surge forth, unable to be contained. This is the way of justice."

I sat there dejectedly, looking at the space where the wall used to be.

"Continue your studies. The time will come," said master, his legs crossed and eyes closed.

"Ah—"

"Yan Shaoyuan! I'm going to tell your mother!"

I looked at Ah Yi standing there smoking. Ah Lun was keeping watch.

"Have you gone crazy lately? Squawking out all day, ruining my naps in class." He blew out a cloud of smoke.

I squatted down. "I can't help it. I have a goal, and it's not an easy thing. Do you know how difficult it is for a middle-school student to set an objective in life?"

Ah Yi spit his cigarette butt onto the ground. "Then what are you doing ignoring Yi Jing? Don't you two usually get along great? You haven't talked to each other for what, a week?"

I nodded, staring at the basketball courts. "It's her fault."

"You little punk," said Ah Yi. "Can you at least tell me and Ah Lun why you're squawking from morning to night?"

I shook my head firmly. "Even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. And I don't want to deal with that."

"****! Just say it!"

"I said no and I meant it," I responded resolutely. "If you want to know, go ask Yi Jing."

Ah Yi snorted. "I asked her a bunch of times already, she wouldn't say anything."

I didn't even respond.

"When are you planning to make up with her?" Ah Yi asked.

I sat down helplessly. "I don't know. It won't go on forever, but, I'm really annoyed right now."

Just then, two third-year upperclassmen came running up. They were Ah Yi's friends, or perhaps his subordinates.

"Well? Did you beat them up?" Ah Yi handed out cigarettes to the two upperclassmen.

One of them laughed. "As soon as those Yan Ming Middle school losers heard your name, Ah Yi, their ****ing legs went weak and they didn't dare to even fight back. Zhi Min and the others gave them a good beating."

With a laugh, the other upperclassmen said, "Whoever told them to bully students from our school can go to hell! Idiots!"

"With me here at Changhua Middle school," said Ah Yi ruthlessly, "Who the hell dares to cause trouble!"

I sat on the ground, watching Ah Yi and his awe-inspiring bearing. I started to wonder how long I would have to keep practicing martial arts before I could win in a fight against a violent maniac like him.

**

Two more weeks passed. Yi Jing and I still hadn't spoken.

I was very confused and disappointed in the way she was treating me.

But luckily, the number of times I cried out in class had declined rapidly. I was now able to control the movement of the energy within my body. Sometimes, controlling the velocity of the Qi as it passed through the acupuncture points was difficult. It required me to forge ahead into the realm of control.

In the evenings, the strength with which master imbued inner force into my body was stronger and stronger, and it seemed I was able to accept increasingly potent levels of inner force.

It was already winter time, and the weather was turning cold. Frigid wind poured in through the empty hole, and occasionally rain, which made my room humid all the time. But it didn't matter; my body was much stronger thanks to the constant Qi circulation.

Mom practically begged me to move into the living room, but I stuck by my decision to live in the crappiest area of the house. I also refused to allowed her to reconstruct the wall. And that, of course, aroused the ridicule of the neighbors.

"Today, I will teach you a foundation among foundations of the Heaven Reaching Sect, the Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand." Master sat in the middle of the hole. It was a moonless night.

"Foundation among foundations?" I said, astonished. "The Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand isn't the most powerful art?"

"Fool. Even the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms [65], which struck terror into the Land of the Rising Sun, has strong points and weak points. Just because you master Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms doesn't mean you can strike terror into the whole world." Master slapped my head.

"Ow. That hurt," I complained.

I never thought that I would be able to learn attacking stances so soon. I was really excited.

To my surprise, Master pulled out a large, dark green bag from behind his back. From within the bag, he pulled out a snake. "In order to help you master it more quickly, I've brought this snake, to help you understand the passages through which your inner energy circulates."

I looked at the black and white striped creature, which appeared to be a large krait snake [66]. "You want me to fight it?"

"No," said Master, sounding a bit hesitant. "I want it to bite you."

"What?" I said in panic. "Isn't that a krait snake?"

Master rubbed his head apologetically. "Yes, it's venomous."

I rushed toward the door. "No way! Don't make me flip out!"

"If it bites you, your martial arts will advance much more quickly," said Master earnestly.

"I ... I ... I'll just advance the normal way!" I shouted. "I'll follow the rules. One step at a time!"

"You really don't want to reach the level of a master sooner?" asked Master impatiently.

**

[65] This is a famous high-level martial art from Jin Yong's novels.
<http://goo.gl/xVY6Pw>

[66] This is a type of highly venomous elapid snake native to Asia.
<http://goo.gl/0CdjMW>

A first glance at the way (3)

I looked at the squirming krait in Master's hand, my face pale. "No!" I exclaimed. "I really am going to flip out! I need to set a good foundation for myself. A solid foundation! Don't take another step forward! I'm serious!"

"Remember when Yang Guo ate the snake venom? His inner force increased tremendously." [57]

"Then let me eat it!" I howled. "Why do you need to have it bite me!"

Master seemed at a loss. "How can you not understand after I've said it so many times. Stick out your hand, quickly!"

I ripped open the door, wanting to dash downstairs. But Master, fast as lightning, closed it before I could move. His right hand tapped my "Ding Dong point"[58] and I was immobilized.

He held up the krait and said, "Do not be nervous. It was difficult for Master to find you, would he foolishly let you drop dead?"

I looked at the krait hissing savagely. I was so scared my teeth were chattering. "There's really no other way to speed things up?" I said hurriedly

Master was quiet for a moment. "Actually there is," he said. "But it is somewhat inconvenient. Although, the result will be double."

"Well that's great!" I said entreatingly. "Inconvenient is no problem. I have a nervous personality, it's fitting for such a method."

"You have heart. Very good," said Master straightforwardly. "I will help you to achieve your goal!"

Tears popped out from my eyes. "Thank you, Master. I will definitely work very hard!"

Master put the krait back into the dark bag, and then leapt out of the hole. He left behind a middle school student with acupuncture points sealed, breathing thankfully in the frigid wind.

Master had lost his mind to torture his disciple in this way. It was a good thing I had entreated...

Oh, please! If I hadn't, I would have been dead! I could see the krait wriggling around in the sack. How disgusting.

A short time later, Master reentered through the hole. "Look!" he said jubilantly.

I looked, and just about fell dead.

In his hand was a real, actual cobra.

"If both of them bite you together, their venoms will mix. It will be very

fierce and brutal. It will definitely be most inconvenient to improve your martial arts in this way, but the power of the Primary Destruction Hand will be redoubled!" Master spoke euphorically, grabbing the krait out of the bag. He had a snake in each hand.

"Master," I said weakly, "Please let me off."

Master gently held the snakes, guiding their heads toward my arms. "The venoms of these two snakes are extremely poisonous. Furthermore, the nature of their toxicity is quite different. When the poison enters your blood stream, it will be very fearsome, almost completely lethal."

I tried to force the Qi through my "Ding Dong point," trying to break the Master's sealing technique. My heart was filled with consternation and helplessness. The krait bit my left forearm first, and I felt a stab of pain. Tears streamed from my eyes.

"If it's almost completely lethal, why would you have them bite me!?" I cried out. Quickly! Help me force the poison out!"

Master looked at me questioningly. "Idiot. I was talking about an ordinary person. You are a practitioner, what are you afraid of? Later on, you will find that most weapons wielded in Jianghu have been coated with poison. If you practice a bit now, you can save yourself from the plots of villains later."

"I'm going numb!" I shrieked miserably. "Master, save me!"

"Do not be anxious," he said consolingly. "There is still one more snake

to go.”

I swore to myself, if I could pass through this, I would definitely resign my discipleship and report Master to the police immediately.

I looked at my forearm, which was slowly growing dark. “Teach me how to expel the poison! Quickly!”

“The snake venom is attacking your blood vessels,” Master murmured. “Therefore, you must use inner force to encircle it, then force it out of your body. This is a shortcut to speed things up, but it will also train you in the use of inner force, and help you to understand the meticulous and wondrous nature of your acupuncture points. Ah, it bit you.”

The cobra gnawed my right forearm viciously. And I glared at Master just as viciously. “If I die, Heaven Reaching Sect will close its doors for good!”

Master shook his head. “You must think of a way to use your inner force to expel the venom. Do not let yourself be flustered.”

I ground my teeth. “Then teach me! Now!” I looked at the cobra clamped onto my right arm and my heart filled with fury.

Master gently opened up my acupuncture point. Then he put the two snakes back into the bag and tied it shut.

I sat down anxiously. “Quickly! How do I expel the venom!”

My hands were numb, and my head was beginning to feel fuzzy. It seemed my neck was already starting to grow stiff.

"Concentrate on the flow of Qi within your body. Slowly bring your inner force into motion, slowly increase its power. Use the Qi to expel the venom."

This was nonsense among nonsense! But I knew it was useless to ask any more questions, so I made every effort to stir the Qi within my bloodstream.

I observed the mingling venoms within my body and implored, "Master. If I can't do it, you have to save me!"

Master nodded.

I focused more deeply on the venom, using my inner force to hold back the venom in the vicinity of the 10 Great Acupuncture points, so as to prevent it from reaching my heart. For the moment, my life was not at risk.

But, as time passed, I saw that my arms were beginning to blacken. I didn't know how to use my inner force to force out the venom. My head was growing murky. There was no way to know whether or not the venom had seeped into the acupuncture points surrounding my heart. "Master," I said urgently, "Get ready!"

Master nodded.

I was beginning to feel somewhat relieved, but then I noticed something shocking: Master was sleeping!

His constant nodding was actually caused by his snoring!

I was livid, but powerless to call out. My poisoned blood was going to cripple my limbs. I was beginning to consider whether or not to give up on trying to expel the poison, and use my last remaining energy to crawl over and wake up Master.

He was drooling.

One drop after another.

Rage surged through my head, leaving me much more sober.

I had to rely on myself.

I remembered that the reason Master had brought the snakes was ... Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand.

I abandoned the idea of using inner force to block the poison. I might as well withdraw the inner force from the 10 Great Acupuncture points and use it to catalyze what I could remember of Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand.

Catalyze.

Catalyze.

Catalyze—

“Ha!” I clenched my teeth and my eyes went dark. The inner force shot from Nighttime Song, Nine Fragments, Ox Breath, Flat Ring, Seedling Chestnut, Guarding Flank and finally to Ascending Tide in the middle of the palm and Shifting Heaven on the fingertip. And then it surged out of my body!

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[57] If I remember correctly, he actually ate the bile glands of vipers...?

[58] This is one of Master’s names for an acupuncture point, not a real name.

A first glance at the way (4)

From the center of my palm floated a dark red mist. It turned out I had successfully fused the venom with my blood and Qi and then dispelled it.

My spirits rose. Even though I wasn't able to discharge all the poison in one shot, not completely, I patiently continued to catalyze the power through my palm. The dark mist slowly grew thinner and thinner. From what I could tell, poison in my body was almost completely expelled. My arms were turning from black to gray, and then from gray to green.

Several minutes passed, and the sky started to grow light. At this point, I was unable to force any more poison out; my inner force was completely depleted.

Even though I felt as weak as ever, I still had the energy to walk up to master and try to kick him.

"No energy?" Master's head moved to the side, avoiding my feeble kick. His palm shot forward toward my Flying Dragon point, and I fell down with a flop.

It was then I realized that Master had been awake the whole time. He had been pretending to sleep to force me to do everything in my power to save myself, to completely clear my mind and temper my inner force as quickly as possible.

I wanted to curse, but then I suddenly realized that within my chest burned an amazing and wonderful inner force. It turned out that Master's

palm strike had infused me with fresh new troops to battle the poison. I sprung into motion, slapping my palms against the wall. Left behind were black handprints. After checking through my veins and arteries to confirm that they were truly poison-free, I finally relaxed and let out a sigh.

I was very happy.

In the winter of 1986, a year of booming scientific and technological advancement, I was able to use inner force to expel poison from my body and heal myself. And despite my fear, I had done it alone! A primordial feeling of confidence caused me to burst into loud laughter.

Even though I was very happy, my body was still quite weak. Two types of poison had engaged in battle with my inner force for an entire night, and my energy was almost completely gone.

"Come here," said Master sleepily, his eyes squinting.

Grinning cheekily, I walked over to master. He placed a burning palm onto the center of my back.

"Twenty circulations should be enough. Start." Master slipped into slumber.

I circulated the restorative Qi and began packing my backpack.

I had to laugh.

After experiencing such an annoying, alarming hardship, I could still actually laugh.

Maybe my personality really was undergoing a transformation.

“What’s wrong with your arm? Why do you have those scary-looking marks?”

I looked at the piece of paper Yi Jing had passed over to me, then tore it into little pieces.

Yi Jing wouldn’t believe.

I could hear faint, non-existent laughter.

Bam! (1)

I'm not sure when it started, but I ended up following Ah Yi, Ah Lun, Xiao Mi and Yi Jing from a distance when school let out. If you asked me why I didn't just walk by myself, but instead followed them like glue, I really couldn't say. Maybe I was waiting for something.

Today when I ripped up the paper Yi Jing had passed to me, well, maybe I had gone a bit too far.

Walking the little path down Bagua Mountain, I looked at Yi Jing from afar. I could hear them talking. Yeah, due to my increasingly solid inner force foundation, I could now vaguely make out sounds from very long distances.

Suddenly, my heart seized.

It started beating rapidly. Warning me.

There was an aura of death.

"Is Master nearby?" I looked around suspiciously.

No, it wasn't Master. This aura of death couldn't compare to his.

Well then, whose was it? Could there be other experts of the martial world at large in society?

Off in the distance I saw a group of middle-aged men, wearing leather outfits and colorful plaid shirts, advancing toward Yi Jing and the others. They carried rolled up newspapers. It looked like there were about seven or eight of them.

The aura of death roiled forth evilly from them. I hoped they weren't connected to Ah Yi in some way.

As I hurried down the stone steps, I saw them surrounding Ah Yi and the others.

Agck! So it was trouble stirred up by Ah Yi.

"Are you the leader, Ah Yi?" The man glared at Ah Yi. His face was crisscrossed with knife scars.

"What the hell?" said Ah Yi snappily.

At this point I was about five paces away from them, but I could sense the terror roiling forth from Ah Yi's heart. And there's no need to even mention the intense fear of Yi Jing and the others.

"You guys are looking for Ah Yi? He's still at school playing basketball!" Ah Lun grinned and clasped Ah Yi's shoulder. "Sheng Yao, just hold on a moment, we can go play video games at your house in a bit."

Ah Yi nodded automatically. The faces of everyone in the group were

pale white with fear, except for Ah Lun, who had reacted so quickly to the danger.

My fists clenched nervously, wet with sweat.

"Don't move!" The lead thug grabbed Ah Yi. "Lying punk! You're not Ah Yi? **** you, you ****ing pussy! You dare to mess with my brothers at Yangming Middle school! And you're not ****ing willing to admit it?!"

Ah Yi's face flickered between green and white. "Well, what are you going to do about it?"

Sweat dripped down Ah Lun's nose. He wiped it away and said, "Brothers, if there's something you want to say, let's discuss it. Why don't we allow the ladies to leave first, okay?"

One of the men, a burly fellow, pulled an iron rod out from his rolled up newspaper. "No one leaves," he said angrily. "Come here, drag them into the woods for me!"

Two thugs grabbed the trembling Yi Jing and Xiao Mi, dragging them toward the dense woods bordering the mountain path. Ah Lun and Ah Yi had no choice but to follow. In a panic, I tried to calculate the distance to the nearest police station.

No way, it was too far.

"Hey! What the hell are you looking at? Come here!" One of the men, his neck covered with tattoos, a stick in his hand, pointed at me. I gritted my

teeth and walked into the woods.

"What are you doing?" Ah Lun said angrily, bemoaning the lost chance to get the police.

"Yi Jing." I looked at the iron rods carried by the thugs.

The woods.

A good place to beat someone up.

Cold sweat covered my body. My instincts were telling me that we were currently in very real danger.

"They're all good students," said Ah Yi, his face white. "It doesn't have anything to do with them, let them..."

"*****er!" The husky fellow gave Ah Yi a fierce kick in the stomach. Ah Yi doubled over onto the ground, his face contorted with pain.

An expression of hesitation filled Ah Lun's face. He looked at Ah Yi, then looked at me, as if he was trying to pass along some sort of message.

I looked at Yi Jing and Xiao Mi. They were so frightened that they wouldn't look up. Tears streamed down their faces.

Ah Lun nodded slightly.

I understood. No problem.

From my leather handbag I pulled out two thousand-yuan bills and respectfully handed them toward the scar-faced leader. "This is for you, sir. Please let the girls go. This doesn't have anything to do with them. We can talk things out after they leave."

The scar-faced thug took the money coldly. "You think I'm an idiot? Let them go so they can go get the police? They're so pretty, it would be such a waste to let them go."

Ah Lun and I suddenly charged toward the thugs holding Yi Jing and Xiao Mi. "Run!" we shouted.

We fell to the ground with the two thugs. Xiao Mi and Yi Jing tried to run, but they were immediately grabbed from behind by the burly fellow. Ah Lun and I were held tight on the ground.

"If you dare to touch those girls," shouted Ah Lun furiously, "I'll kill you!"

"Let them go!" yelled Ah Yi. "I'll let you beat me up for as long as you want!"

I looked at Yi Jing, struggling, her eyes filled with terror.

The scar-faced thug hit Ah Yi in the head with his rod. Blood instantly covered his entire face.

The tattooed thug kicked his head. Laughing, he said, "**** your mother! Kill us? You better not get killed first!"

Feet kicked down at me randomly. I struggled to rise, blood clouding my eyes. I could faintly make out the sight of some of the thugs groping Yi Jing roughly.

"Master." I struggled to my feet, forcing my breath under control.

There was Ah Yi, being beaten underneath a tree. Ah Lun lunged wildly toward Xiao Mi, but then got clocked in the face by one of the thugs' rods and fell flat onto his face.

"Nighttime Song, Nine Fragments..." I slowly stretched out my right hand. The thug slammed his rod into my stomach.

I accepted the pain, my legs bending slightly. I continued: "Ox Breath, Flat Ring, Seedling Chestnut... Guarding Flank..."

Blood spurted out from my head, but my eyes never left Yi Jing's tear-stained face.

"****! What the hell are you saying? You trying to cast a spell on us or something?" The burly fellow bashed my nose.

"Ascending Tide... Shifting Heaven," I murmured, blood flowing from my nose.

"Still casting a spell!" cursed the burly fellow. He raised his iron club.

"Bam." My head split open, and blood spattered. However, my palm had already connected with the burly man's chest. His face contorted.

He slowly dropped to the ground, kneeling in front of me.

Everything suddenly became very quiet.

"There is something in this world called justice..." I staggered toward Yi Jing, continuing to recite: "Nighttime Song, Nine Fragments... Ox Breath... Shifting Heaven..."

Bam! (2)

“****!” Two thugs raised their iron clubs and slammed them down onto my shoulders. As my shoulders soaked up the pain, my two palms stretched out towards their midsections.

“Bam,” I said. The two thugs’ pupils dilated. Blood vomited from their mouths, and they sank to the ground, grovelling.

The burly fellow holding Yi Jing and Xiao Mi was shocked. “You’re possessed!”

The scar-faced leader looked stupefied. “You freak!” He walked toward me, brandishing his iron club.

Tilting my head in satisfaction, I strode toward Yi Jing. “Why didn’t you believe me?” I said perfunctorily.

Yi Jing could only cry.

“Why are you crying?” I asked numbly. And then I chokingly said: “Ah!!!”

The scar-faced thug had wrapped his hands around my neck from behind.

“Stop hurting him!” cried Yi Jing.

I was almost dragged into unconsciousness, but I forced my palm toward the thug's chin. His eyes went wide, and the hands on my neck loosened.

His face raised toward the heavens, and he slowly dropped to the ground like a de-stringed marionette.

"I can do kung fu," I coughed. "I'm going to save you."

The burly man looked at the glazed eyes of his scar-faced leader. He was so scared that he instantly released Yi Jing and Xiao Mi, then turned and made to run off.

"Bam!" My palm landed right in the middle of the burly fellow's back. He fell to the ground with a thud. The three thugs who had been beating Ah Yi and Ah Lun scattered in a panic and fled out of the woods. As they left they chanted under their breaths, "Praise to Amitābha." [69]

My head was woozy, but the image of the burly fellow was branded in my mind. I squatted down next to him, and gave him "bam" three more times. "Bam" until he woke up and then passed out again and then woke up again.

I wanted to bam him a hundred times, but I didn't have the energy.

I lifted my head and saw Ah Lun helping the girls. And then, I fell asleep.

"Mom?"

When I woke up, I was laying on the sofa in the living room.

"Your classmates brought you here. You've been causing a ruckus in class lately, and now you've been fighting! When your father gets back, he'll beat you to death!" Mom wiped my face with a cloth.

I closed my eyes and began circulating my energy through my blood vessels.

I had saved Yi Jing.

I was very happy.

Tears filled my eyes.

There was a note in my backpack.

"Thank you. I am really sorry."

They were six simple characters, but they sent my inner force roiling. In a twinkling, I had completed eighteen full circulations.

"Master, I want to become an ultimate expert!" I gave a loud shout toward the giant hole.

"Great! This is the correct thinking!" Master stood next to me, looking

quite satisfied.

My body was covered with Merchurochrome medicine, Crystal Violet medicine, Guangdong alfalfa powder, and Green Oil . I stretched my body, invigorated, not feeling an ounce of pain. [70]

"You used your martial arts today!" Master sat cross-legged on the bed. "Jianghu is filled with trials and hardships, but you should avoid fighting. You did end up fighting, but Master believes that you comprehend the importance of justice. You had no choice but to fight, correct?"

"Right! I defeated a group of scoundrels! And I saved the girl I love!" I circulated my inner force, excited.

"You saved the girl you love..." murmured Master to himself. His eyes suddenly became empty.

I looked at him and gingerly asked, "Was it not the right thing to do?"

Master shook his head and sighed. "No. You did great. Master is very pleased"

Ever since filling my body with inner force, I could not only sense auras of death, I could also feel the whole gamut of emotions emitted by others. Right now, Master had slipped back into grievous memories of the past.

I suddenly realized that I knew almost nothing about Master. I only knew that he was an old man who possessed amazing powers. He had

traveled to the four corners of the earth before finding me. Every night he would jump through the hole into my room and happily teach his lucky disciple.

I sat down next to him. "Master," I said. "Where do you live?"

"I have a place in Yuanlin[71]," he said, sounding lonely. "But I usually don't go back there. When I'm sleepy, I just find a tree, climb up and fall to sleep."

Master really was a sad, lonely old man.

"Master, if you'd like, you can always sleep here."

With a laugh, he said, "It doesn't matter. Sleeping in trees is another type of kung fu. Sooner or later you will need to do it too."

I sensed a bit of coldness, and forced myself to laugh. "Let's worry about that later." I asked another question: "Master, I don't know your name. Why did you end up studying kung fu? What was your master like?"

As I asked my three questions, Master closed his eyes and waved his hand, indicating that I shouldn't inquire.

"One day, you will know." Tears seeped from his eyes, and he suddenly looked much older.

I sat quietly by his side, sadness welling up from my heart.

After a while, Master spoke. "Let's continue with your practice. You need to work hard tonight." He pulled the two snakes out from the bag again.

I nodded, courageously sticking out my arms.

Even though they trembled uncontrollably, I couldn't stop from asking, "What kind of snakes did you bring this time?"

Things went back to the way they used to be with Yi Jing. We talked and laughed.

The only difference was, when we got out of class, Yi Jing grabbed me and asked about all the interesting things that had happened when I was practicing martial arts. And of course, many of Master's absurd recollections of "records of the martial world" left Yi Jing in stitches. When she heard about my all-night battles with the snake venom, she rubbed the bite marks on my arms in shock and asked me if I was sure my life wasn't in danger.

When school let out at the end of the day, Yi Jing quietly held my hand. Held it tightly.

My heart beat faster than it had when Master emitted his aura of death.

Yi Jing didn't dare to look at me. Her face flushed, she said, "Can you ... let me feel your kung fu ... please?"

My whole body felt like it was on fire. I transferred some of my inner force into Yi Jing's palm.

The warm, gentle inner force circulated back and forth between our small, tightly clasped hands.

**

[69] This is one of the standard chants in Buddhism. And Amitābha is one of the most common Buddhas. <http://goo.gl/iJs2Cb>

[70] Here's a list of all the medicines: 1) Merchurochrome is a type of medicine that stains your skin red. The literal Chinese translation is "red potion." <http://goo.gl/TsHgJ> 2) Crystal Violet medicine: <http://goo.gl/Z20fho>. 3) Guangdong alfalfa powder, I could only find Chinese articles, no English. 4) Green oil is a super common type of medicine in China <http://goo.gl/xpNQXM>

[71] Another city in Changhua county: <http://goo.gl/qQ3SpS>

Bam! (3)

That night, the setting sun was beautiful.

I will never forget it for my entire life.

I have to mention Ah Yi now.

He is a natural born fighter. So the day after I “bammed” the thugs down, he came to me, wrapped in gauze bandages, and begged me to take him to become a disciple.

“I already asked Master, but he said he wouldn’t accept you,” I said awkwardly.

“Why?! Because I hit him? Worst case scenario, I’ll let him beat me in return! A true man has the courage to accept the consequences of his actions!” Ah Yi gripped my shoulder tightly. It hurt.

“That was just a secondary matter. Master said you don’t have the natural ability.” Ah Yi didn’t look convinced. “Ai, fine, I’ll ask him again for you!”

Ah Yi banged his fist on the table. “How could I not have ability! You do, why don’t I? Tonight, I’ll go myself to beg him. I’ll show off a move or two and he’ll see how awesome I am! He’ll definitely accept me!”

But Ah Yi really didn’t have the natural ability. As he was speaking, I

continuously emitted an aura of death, but he couldn't sense it at all.

Yet, I still took him to see Master. He was my friend, after all, and it would be much more fun for two people to study martial arts together than only one.

If I could go back in time, I wouldn't take Ah Yi to see Master.

It was the prologue to tragedy.

Ah Yi stood next to me, standing tall, his chest stuck out, showing off his physique.

Master looked at him for a moment. Then, shaking his head, he said, "This kid won't do."

"I won't do?" said Ah Yi, surprised. "Then how can Shao Yuan become your disciple?"

Master frowned, sitting down cross-legged. "Your natural ability is even worse than mine was. What good is an impressive frame?"

Ah Yi knelt down. "Master!" he said sincerely. "I wholeheartedly want to study kung fu with you. If my natural ability is poor, then I'll study exponentially harder! I won't do any schoolwork at all, I'll devote all my time to practicing kung fu. I don't care! I want to become powerful!"

I looked down at Ah Yi. I'd never imagined he would be so focused on

martial matters. So I decided to try to help him out. "Ah Yi's not a bad guy, he just likes to stand up for others. Natural ability ... well, Master, you must have some other martial arts you can teach, right?"

Master glared at me for a moment, and then looked back at the kneeling Ah Yi. "Let me ask you. After you become powerful, what will you do?"

With a bellow, Ah Yi declared: "I want to use my unmatched courage and superhuman intelligence to strike out against criminals and champion the cause of the innocent, the helpless, and the powerless!"

As Ah Yi shouted out some of the opening lines of Knight Rider, which was really popular that year, he really seemed like he was Michael Knight driving KITT. [72]

Master listened blankly. After a while, he said, "You have superhuman intelligence?"

"Yes!" he shouted fervently.

Master looked at me. "Does he?" he asked.

I was forced to nod. "He's really smart."

It was true. If Ah Yi applied himself, he could easily displace the top names in the monthly exams.

Master closed his eyes, and then finally nodded. "You must remember, having high level kung fu is secondary. Acting in defiance of the law or public good is strictly forbidden. A true hero and swordsman serves the country and the people. Kowtow!"

Ah Yi went wild with joy, kowtowing vigorously and shouting, "Master! Master! Master! Master!"

Master helped up the somewhat woozy Ah Yi. Suspiciously, he said, "Does this kid really have superhuman intelligence?"

"A fencing sword is not sharp," I replied vaguely. "Skill is more important than form."

Master shook his head and had Ah Yi sit down cross-legged. "If we were to compare natural ability to weaponry, you and the Sect Founder would be divine swords. Master would be a machete, and Ah Yi would be a hammer."

"Master," said Ah Yi earnestly, "You've judged me wrong."

I tried to smooth things over by following up on what Master had just said. "What kind of person was the Sect Founder?"

Master hesitated a moment. "Some things, when the time is right, you two..."

"Master," I said hurriedly, "I want to know more about you, and I want to know more about the Heaven Reaching Sect."

Ah Yi rested his head in his hands. "Yeah! Yuan Zai joined the Sect so long ago, but he doesn't know anything."

Master knocked Ah Yi's head. "Call him Senior Disciple! Yuan Zai is your Senior Fellow Disciple! The Heaven Reaching Sect has a system of seniority. The rules of seniority among disciples are a foundation among foundations."

Ah Yi's face did not look happy, but he said, "Senior Disciple!"

It felt really weird to me, but I forced myself to reply, "Junior Disciple!"

Master looked at us and said, "Fellow disciples should have happy and harmonious dealings. They must support each other, and will never shy away from sacrificing their own lives to ensure the wellbeing of the other. This shared spirit of chivalry is a source of blessings for the common people. If any member of the Sect uses the kung fu they have learned to hurt innocent people, I will be forced to cripple all the martial arts in his body, and perhaps even take his life. Remember this!"

"Yes!" we responded in unison. "Master!"

Master rose and walked over to stand in the cold wind next to the hole. He lowered his head, as if he were hesitating about something.

Ah Yi's whole body was shivering. He grabbed my quilt and wrapped himself up in it.

About ten minutes passed, and then finally Master began to speak.

"The Heaven Reaching Sect was founded during the Yuan Dynasty [73]. The great Founder was surnamed Gao. His given name was Chengshu, but everyone in Jianghu called him 'Curly-haired old Gao.' The year that he founded the sect, he cleared out eight bandit camps in a single breath. It caused a stir in orthodox and unorthodox circles alike! Then, at the foot of Mount Song he competed against Shaolin. Three days and three nights passed, and in the end he smashed the best martial arts of Shaolin's lead fighter. The name Heaven Reaching Sect became known to everyone under heaven!" As he recounted the history of the Heaven Reaching Sect, Master's voice slowly became vibrant and filled with excitement.

"Whoah! Shaolin's Muscle and Tendon Changing Classic and their 72 Consummate Skills [74] can't match up to the Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand?!"

"The Muscle and Tendon Changing Classic is amazing," said Master sternly. "But what was also amazing was Shaolin's ability to accumulate prostitutes. The Shaolin Masters were so entranced by the charms of women that their power was not like it was in the past."

Confused, Ah Yi said, "Isn't everyone in Shaolin Temple a monk? Monks can be with prostitutes?"

Master sighed. "Shaolin's 72 Consummate prostitutes [75], each as beautiful as a flower. Many old monks couldn't control themselves, and violated the tenants of the extremely manly Virgin Kung Fu [76]. Their martial arts declined, and a sterling reputation earned over hundreds of years saw a huge setback."

[72] I'm sure I don't need to explain Knight Rider... <http://goo.gl/rvG36>

[73] The Yuan Dynasty was the period of time in which the Mongols ruled China, during the 1200-1300's. <http://goo.gl/xrZkZm>

[74] These are both real martial arts of Shaolin, which of course also make their appearances in wuxi a novels. <http://goo.gl/0thpr>
<http://goo.gl/TfTyfS>

[75] In Chinese the word for skill and the word for prostitute have the same pronunciation but different characters. By switching that one character, well... you can see the result.

[76] Virgin Kung Fu is a real Shaolin art. It was also mentioned in my 7 Killers translation. <http://goo.gl/ZLiK5M>

Bam! (4)

Ah Yi's mouth hung wide open.

I almost burst out laughing, but I still wanted to hear more of Master's ridiculous tales.

He held his arms behind his back and paced back and forth. "Not long after, the great Founder spent a lot of money to help Shaolin get rid of the 72 Consummate Prostitutes. Afterwards, Shaolin slowly recovered and began to grow again. At that time, the great Founder set himself up at Yingcai Peak. He gathered thirteen disciples, every one extraordinarily talented. In Jianghu they came to be known as the Heaven Reaching 13 Officials. They were quite the competition for the 7 Heroes of Wudang."
[77]

Master looked outside the hole, seemingly in a trance. "Within the 13 Officials, the first ranking senior disciple was surnamed Chen. His given name was Jiexuan. [78] He was an upright man with expert sword technique and matchless in inner arts. After defeating Chu Liuxiang [79] on Mount Hua [80], everyone in Jianghu started to call him 'The guy who defeated Chu Liuxiang.' He was my master. When you calculate it, I am a third generation disciple of the Heaven Reaching Sect."

As Master talked, tears covered his face and he knelt to his knees, offering prayerful respect to distant memories.

[77] The Seven Heroes of Wudang appear in Jin Yong's fiction
<http://goo.gl/oP6yqc>

[78] Chen Jiexuan's name is 陈介玄 chén jiè xuán

[79] Chu Liuxiang is the protagonist of series of books by Gu Long.
<http://goo.gl/8VtUrX>

[80] Mount Hua is one of the five most famous mountains in China, and also a fictional location of some important martial arts competitions
<http://goo.gl/qBiF>

Lan Jin (1)

But there was something that left me quite puzzled.

“That’s not quite right. Master, how could you be a third generation disciple?” Without even calculating carefully I could tell that the time element was a bit preposterous.

Ah Yi also seemed to gain his senses. “Yeah. My history is pretty bad, but I’m pretty sure the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty [81] was a really long time ago.”

I suddenly thought of a possibility. “Maybe master happened to get ahold of Founder Chen’s handwritten secret manuals, and that was how you learned all you awesome kung fu?”

Master shook his head painfully. “I most certainly am Heaven Reaching Sect Master Chen’s senior disciple, and all my kung fu was painstakingly taught to me directly by him. He carved me out one palm at a time. Ai, there was much pain and suffering that occurred in the past. The affairs of human life are profound and strange, and the lessons we learn cannot be avoided.”

I still didn’t understand, and could only ask, “Did Founder Chen live a really long time?”

Master leaned against the wall, tears streaming down his face. “Master Chen met with great catastrophe, and he only lived to fifty-four years of age.”

Ah Yi and I were completely befuddled, not sure what to ask.

If our Master was personally taught by his Master, wouldn't that mean he was born during the Ming Dynasty? It seemed that he was once again spouting nonsense.

He wiped his tears away and said, "Yuan Zai, do you think Master is a lunatic?"

I shook my head, ignoring my true thoughts. "Master, you are a great person. You're not a lunatic."

He blew his nose with a laugh. "Actually, the past few decades, I've been called a lunatic wherever I went. When all is said and done, the average person would have no way to accept the story I am about to tell."

I thought about everything that had happened to me, and how no one had believed me. It had been so painful and lonely. So I sincerely said, "Master, no matter what you say, I will believe you!"

His eyes glistened. "Really?"

I nodded my head. "Even if no one else under heaven believes, Ah Yi and I will stand by you."

Ah Yi could only agree with me. "Correct," he said grudgingly.

Next, Master let out a deep sigh, and then tirelessly recounted a horrific, blood-soaked story from the histories of the martial world.

I was the son of an ordinary peasant, and I lived in Huang Clan Village, the eldest of my siblings. Dad and Mom called me Ah Jun [82]. It was a very dignified name, not randomly picked like Ah Mao or Ah Gou [83]. Dad took my astrological name chart to the local teacher and begged him to help select it. They had deep expectations for me.

At that time, I worked in the field all day with the villagers. If God favoured us, we would eat a little more. If the county Mandarin or the landlord were in a bad mood, we would eat a little less. When the busy season was over, I would take my brothers along with some of the neighbor's children into the woods to play. Since I was a bit older, I of course was the ringleader.

One afternoon, I led everyone into a scuffle with the neighbouring Li Clan Village. Afterwards, when we came out of the woods, we happened across a burly man laying concealed in the bushes. Everyone was afraid he was dead, and scattered in fear. Only I had the nerve to climb forward and check out the situation. I saw that his shoulder, chest, and belly were soaked with blood. His eyes were wide open; he was most likely dead.

I moved closer, thinking that maybe I would be able to find some money, when suddenly he blinked, and said with a laugh, "You've got a lot guts, little buddy."

I was so scared my legs became weak. I wasn't sure if he was a man or a ghost.

The big man laughed happily. "I'm a person. And I'm a good person. You don't need to be afraid."

I'd never seen a ghost before, but since it was broad daylight and the man was laughing, my dread lessened by about half. Nervously, I said, "What's wrong with you?"

Derisively, he said, "Can't you see that I've been injured, buddy? There's no need to pay any attention to me. Go hide somewhere far away. If my enemies come back, they might take your little life!"

As I listened, I felt quite nervous. "You think I'm some kind of coward?"

Beads of sweat covered the man's face, but he still laughed. "Even though my injury is pretty serious, my enemies won't benefit from returning. At the worst, we will die together. If you're really not afraid of death, kid, then great. Here, take this!"

He pulled out three heavy gold ingots and said, "Take it. One of them is for traveling expenses. The other two are my expression of thanks. Go to Yingcai Peak for me. Tell the leader of the Heaven Reaching Sect that the unworthy disciple Jie Xuan has let him down. He's a dyed-in-the-wool true man, but sadly, he won't be able to dispatch any more local strongmen. He must depart, and the next time he meets the other heroes will be in the afterlife!"

I took the gold and listened. Hearing his awe-inspiring speech really moved me; tears seeped from my eyes.

The big man laughed and pulled out some pieces of silver. "Don't worry, little buddy. Look, I still have some silver left. I plan to spend it on the way back to Yingcai Peak."

He laughed, and then coughed up some dark blood.

I gritted my teeth. "Yuancai Peak is too far. I've never even gone farther than the woods before."

The man seemed shocked. With a laugh he said, "Well that's really too bad. But you have some gold now. You're rich! Come on, get going, quickly."

I shook my head, grabbing the big man and helping him up. He was surprised, and was about to start speaking but I cut him off: "Are you looking down on me?"

He laughed helplessly. He let me support him, and we staggered together toward a nearby brook to wash him clean of the stench of blood. I scrounged up some skinny sweet potatoes and handed them to the man.

Chewing on the sweet potatoes, he gripped my hand weakly, and laughingly said, "It's a true pleasure to be able to meet a true man like you before I die."

That made me very happy. We chatted for a while, and then I finally understood how he had come to be injured.

It turned out the man was a chivalrous expert of the martial world. He had sacrificed much to slay the Sword Devil of the Central Plains Chu Liuxiang. Afterwards, all the devils of the unorthodox sects of the twin provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi had joined together in an alliance to kill him. The man was hit by a sneak attack palm from Ouyang Feng, and also struck in the back by Zhang Wuji's Thunderbolt Club [84]. Therefore, he was forced to flee. He traveled in secret until he could not hold out any longer, and collapsed.

"Don't worry. Ouyang Feng and Zhang Wuji both were struck by my palm. They also need to recover. The rest of the unorthodox gremlins and clowns are nothing. If they show up in pairs, I'll kill them in pairs." As he spoke, he coughed up blood.

**

[81] The Ming was the second to the last of the Chinese Imperial Dynasties <http://goo.gl/Gch2j6>

[82] This character 駿 jun means a fine horse.

[83] Mao and Gou are the characters for cat and dog

[84] Ouyang Feng and Zhang Wuji are both major characters in Jin Yong novels. Ouyang Feng is a super-powerful villain and Zhang Wuji is the protagonist of his novel. They both come from different eras. Ouyang Feng: <http://goo.gl/MN7yLJ> Zhang Wuji: <http://goo.gl/OnAZ0T>

Lan Jin (2)

After sunset, under the cover of darkness, I secretly helped the man into the village.

"So that man was Founder Jiexuan, and that's how he took you as his disciple?" I asked.

Master ignored me and proceeded at his own pace to recount his memories from the Ming Dynasty.

When Dad saw me carrying a half dead guy into the room, he didn't hit or curse me, but instead helped me carry him to the bed to rest. And then he asked me where the man had come from. I told him, and he praised me, saying I'd handled matters in a big-hearted and straightforward manner, just like a true man. He was very happy.

The man lay in bed with a high fever for three days. Once he was finally able to get up and move around, he starting taking daily doses of herbal medicine that dad boiled up. His body gradually began to recover. By the seventh day, presumably because of his profound inner force, he was almost completely better. He gave us the three gold ingots to express his gratitude, expressing his desire to leave the village. He wished to avoid drawing his enemies here and causing problems for the Huang Clan Village.

Dad grabbed me and we knelt in front of him. Dad begged him to take me as a disciple, to turn me into an indomitable true man. He didn't want me to grow up to be a land-tilling peasant.

The man agreed happily. He said that even though I wasn't necessarily prime material to practice martial arts, I possessed something more important: a chivalrous heart. He would be lucky to be my master.

I still remember that day. I stood behind my master, dumbfounded, slowly walking out of Huang Clan Village. Dad pulled along mom, her eyes filled with tears, and a bunch of my friends stood at the village gate weeping. My youngest sister pulled my hand, urging me not to leave, tears streaming from her eyes, her nose running. I wanted to stay in the Huang Clan Village and till the earth for the rest of my life. But when I saw the hope in Dad's eyes, I was unable to shed a tear.

When the ringleader of the kids from Li Clan Village heard that I was leaving to study kung fu, he brought a bunch of children out of to wait for me. As soon as he saw me with master, the ringleader, whose name was Li Daquan, heroically set a pact with me. After studying martial arts for ten years, I would return, and we would have a contest.

After we clasped hands to seal the pact, I caught sight of the girl from Li Clan Village who I liked. She hid behind a large tree, wiping away her tears. She was the prettiest girl in the village. Everyone called her Hua Mao'er, and she was Li Daquan's younger sister. I loved her cute dimples, and the way she was as bashful as a little cat. [85]

Ai, as soon as I saw her tears, my tears flowed.

When Li Daquan saw that, he told me in a tough voice that if I defeated him ten years from now, he would give me her hand in marriage. Hearing his promise made me feel even more dejected. Ai, if I returned to the

village ten years later, how could Hua Mao'er even remember me? She was so pretty, she would surely have long since married someone else.

And then, Master suddenly lowered his head and asked me if I liked Hua Mao'er. I nodded, and Master let out a hearty laugh and slapped my head. "How about this. Let's stay in the village to practice martial arts. Otherwise, in ten years' time, Hua Mao'er might marry someone else, and then you'll stare at me constantly with that look of pain!"

I listened, listened to Master laughingly say: "I owe you my life. And kung fu is kung fu, no matter where you practice it. The methods are the same whether we are in Huang Clan Village or Yingcai Peak. Since you love Hua Mao'er, let's stay in the village, that way you can make a great impression on everyone!"

I kneeled to the ground in gratitude, kowtowing three times, hitting my head hard against the ground, swearing to diligently practice martial arts, eliminate traitors and destroy evil.

And then I returned with Master to Huang Clan Village. Mom happily slaughtered chickens and a pig, and Dad was unable to conceal his happiness. Yet, I couldn't help but nervously ask Master, "What happens if those bastards come? What will we do?"

Master walked toward a large slab of stone and, with a laugh, chopped it into four pieces. "I'm already 80% recovered. If they have the guts to show up, they won't be able to leave with their lives." He called some villagers over to help him move the pieces of stone to the village gate. He wrote five characters on them with chicken blood to serve as a warning: "Chen Jiexuan's Grass Palm."

As it turned out, for the following three months, the bastards didn't have the guts to come seek after Master's life. Master industriously instructed me in the secrets of martial arts. Finally one evening when we were finished practicing, we sat there in the village singing songs. And Master quietly told me that one night when the villagers were fast asleep, during his routine of watching over the village, he had found the villains, come to seek their revenge. He'd landed a deadly palm on each, but in the darkness, Ouyang Feng and Zhang Wuji had fled, severely injured. So master had written a letter to Yingcai Peak, asking two of his fellow disciples to come help.

A year passed, and my martial arts were progressing. The two martial uncles arrived. They were Wang Zhenhuan, Second Uncle Wang, and Zhang Wei'an, Third Uncle Wang. They were both extremely high level martial artists and incomparable heroes. When they arrived at the village gate, they carried in their hands the heads of Ouyang Feng and Zhang Wuji!

Thusly, Master and Master's fellow disciples came to live in the Huang Clan Village. During the day they would instruct me in martial arts, and sometimes help the villagers with their farming. Those days were the happiest of my life.

Even though practicing martial arts was very difficult, every day Hua Mao'er would bring tea for me and stand by, watching me practice. When Master and I grew tired, she would serve us. Everyone in both villages was talking about when we should get married. Whenever I saw her, bashfully biting her lip, my heart felt like it would explode.

The winter wind blew in through the hole in my bedroom, freezing

Master's words.

A long time passed, and Master said nothing.

I thought back to the sweet moment today when Yi Jing had secretly clasped my hand and we had walked down Ba Gua mountain together.

Master must have been just as happy back then.

"Master, what happened after that?" I asked.

"After that..." Master's palm shot out, making a strange sound in the emptiness.

"After that, how could you live all the way from the Ming Dynasty until now, the year 1986 A.D.?" I asked, fearing Master was going to go crazy.

Master suddenly let out a furious howl, long and unending. Ah Yi and I were so frightened by the booming noise that we contracted into ourselves. We watched as master screamed and attacked the air with his palm. His inner force mobilized along with his attack and the room filled with a rushing, thunder-like sound. Qi energy screamed.

Master had never gone this crazy before. I saw that his furious eyes were swollen with grief. His tears had transcended time, from the ancient Ming Dynasty, they dripped into the lonesome year of 1986.

Had master gone crazy?

**

[85] The characters of her name Hua Mao literally means calico cat, and he uses the same two characters here to describe her.

Lan Jin (3)

I didn't think so.

Master was just too hurt.

At last he stopped, and didn't move at all.

"Should we run?" mouthed Ah Yi nervously. He'd shrunk back into the quilt.

Forcing himself to speak calmly, Master said, "Yuan Zai, I haven't taught you sword techniques yet, have I?"

I nodded, and then Master casually broke apart my wooden chair and hoisted one of the chair legs. "If a sword technique's ingenuity lies in its movements, then it is a second-rate technique. If the sword technique is fundamentally without technique, then the power of the sword is matchless and invincible."

As he spoke, Master lifted up the chair leg and slashed it toward the concrete wall next to the bed! His aura of death was astonishing.

Ah Yi and I watched as the a large fissure appeared in the wall, which was on the other side of the room.

I knew.

I knew that the wall next to the bed was destroyed.

With only the tap of a fingertip, it would collapse in half.

If a room only has two walls, it really can't be called a room.

It should be called a "cave."

Ah Yi stared dumbly at the mark left by the sword on the wall and said, "The sword aura did that?"

I stared at Master, my mouth hanging wide. He looked somewhat apologetic.

"I am sorry," he said guiltily. "I really do not feel well at heart." He put down the chair leg.

"Don't worry about it," I said, somewhat dazed. "One cannot get something new without first getting rid of the old."

"Do you want to me to continue?" asked Master.

Ah Yi didn't dare to make a sound, but I decidedly voice my opinion: "Yes!" I dashed downstairs and grabbed some tangerine Fanta and HeySong Sarsaparilla [86] from the refrigerator, then hurried back to my 'cave' room.

"That year..." With a heavy heart, Master recounted the sorrowful events of the past. "It was not just two uncles who arrived in Huang Clan Village. They brought with them their disciples. Third Master Uncle Zhang's disciple—Shan Renshu [87]. And also Second Master Uncle Wang's disciple..."

Master's eyes flashed with a hatred I had never before seen. In an instant my entire body was engulfed with a deep feeling of enmity.

It was an energy even more profound than an aura of death.

Master painfully uttered the name of Second Master Uncle Wang's disciple, and the soda in the mug suddenly boiled over.

"Lan Jin." [88]

Lan Jin, a person Master had detested for three hundred years.

A person who many years later I would long to hunt down and kill.

"Lan Jin? He's the bad guy?" I asked, watching Master's trembling hands.

"He's not a person," said Master coldly.

By the time I reached seventeen years of age, I had already studied martial arts for five years. Thanks to Master's daily training, my martial

arts weren't bad. Seeing me train so hard made him very happy. He would often grab me and Hua Mao'er by the hand, sit us under a tree, and tell us stories, many fascinating stories about his time wandering Jianghu. I learned much of the history of the martial world in this way.

Master Uncle Wang and Master Uncle Zhang also settled down in the village. Master Uncle Zhang even ended up marrying one of the village girls, who gave birth to a plump baby. Master Uncle Zhang's disciple Shan Renshu had studied martial arts with him from a very young age. When I was seventeen years old, he was twenty-one, and had already assimilated most of Master Uncle Zhang's teachings. And Master Uncle Wang's disciple—Lan Jin, was only fifteen. He also had studied from a very young age with Master Uncle Wang. He usually didn't speak, and the strangest thing was, his progress in martial arts was frightening. At fifteen, he was above both myself and Renshu. He overflowed with talent, so much so that sometimes even Master Uncle Wang was not sure how much he was capable of. His potential seemed limitless, completely unfathomable.

One day, when Master Uncle Wang returned from a neighboring province, he bore with him a first task for us three youngsters: Deliver a warning to the Guang'nan Tiger Ferry horse thief gang. [89] They must disperse immediately.

As soon as I heard, I was nervous. After all, I had no actual combat experience. But Master told me that my kung fu was good enough, and as a noble martial artist, the time had come for me to venture out into the world.

And so, two days later, early in the morning, Renshu, Lan Jin and I packed our traveling bags. I said goodbye to Mom and Dad, then headed off for Guang'nan.

At that time, Hua Mao'er, the girl I loved, stood at the forest entrance outside the village, seeing me off. She sang a traditional love song from the Li Clan village, pledging her love. Ai... Hua Mao'er was a shy girl and her face flushed red as she sang. The lyrics explained that she would wait for me to return, and when I did, she would be mine! I watched her silhouette slowly fade away, but her song echoed in my ears. I rode on the back of a horse, my hand tightly gripping the sword that Master had given me. My two fellow disciples and I were devoted wholeheartedly to rooting out evil. But soon I would return to reunite with Hua Mao'er.

When we arrived at the Guang'nan Tiger Ferry, we three disciples found a run-down temple, where we began to discuss how to follow Master and Master Uncles' instructions to avoid using violence in dispersing the wicked horse thief gang. Renshu and I felt that it would be quite difficult, considering our opponents comprised over one hundred trained experts. Their chieftain was "Ren Woxing," [90] a master of the Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms. Trying to talk reason to a person like that was setting oneself up to be rejected. And to take direct action would be like throwing an egg against a rock. To make matters worse, the local officials had already been bought off by the horse thieves. If we attacked and failed, there would be nowhere to hide in Guang'nan.

The first test Master had arranged for us in Jianghu was quite dangerous, and it showed how high his expectations were in the three of us. The situation was dire, but as Renshu and I discussed our feelings, our spirits grew higher and higher.

The whole night, Lan Jin just listened to us coolly. He did not utter a single word, and finally Renshu and I just went to sleep. The next morning when the rooster crowed, we woke up and discovered that Lan Jin was nowhere to be found.

We waited for him for the amount of time it takes an incense stick to burn, but he never returned. Renshu figured he might have gone to the horse thief's stockade camp to scout it out. So we left behind a secret message for him in case he returned, picked up our weapons, and hurried to the vicinity of the horse thief camp, worried that Lan Jin might be in danger.

To our surprise, when we arrived at the thieves' stockade, we saw the corpses of several horse thieves lying outside the entrance. All had been slain by a sword, and the techniques used to make the wounds seemed vaguely like the Heaven Reaching Cloud Dispersing Sword. It turned out that Lan Jin had taken advantage of the time we spent sleeping to charge alone into the stockaded village!

And then, Renshu and I could hear pleas of mercy coming from off in the distance. We mobilized our Qi and dashed toward the sounds. Soon we caught sight of Lan Jin, standing next to a pond, his body covered in blood.

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[86] This is a Taiwanese beverage <http://goo.gl/yuVyrI>

[87] Shan Renshu's name is 单人书 shàn rén shū. Ren means person, and shu means book.

[88] Lan Jin's name is 蓝金 lán jīn. Lan means blue and jin means gold.

[89] Guang'nan is located in Yunnan <http://tinyurl.com/kr4uxo9>

[90] Ren Woxing is one of the main protagonists of Smiling Proud Wanderer. He never used Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms
<http://tinyurl.com/ogkugmz>

Lan Jin (4)

As I think about it now, the scene was truly shocking. Renshu vomited, and my legs began to tremble. Hacked up corpses filled the large pond. Bodies lay in piles everywhere and the stench of blood filled the air. If the bodies hadn't been wearing clothing, it would have been impossible to tell whether they were people or animals.

Lan Jin caught sight of the two of us. His normally pale face was even grimmer than normal and he held two short swords in his hands. He threw one of them over to me and pointed at the horse thief chieftain Ren Woxing, who sat next to him, acupuncture points sealed, unable to move. He meant for me to make the final move together with him.

I didn't pick up Lan Jin's short sword, because Ren Woxing's appearance was just too miserable.

His eyes had been bored out, and all ten of his fingers sliced off... sliced into thirty pieces. The major arteries in his body had been crushed, and his skin was covered with sword slashes. The soles of his feet had been hacked into mincemeat, his tongue cut out and stuffed into one of his empty eye sockets. It was more than miserable. He was more than half dead.

"I sealed all the acupuncture points in his body and stopped his blood vessels. You two can cut him for the time it takes two incense sticks to burn and he still won't die," said Lan Jin coldly. He chopped off Ren Woxing's hand with his short sword. "Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms, only so-so."

Off to the side, Renshu vomited until tears streamed out of his eyes. I couldn't hold back from loudly rebuking Lan Jin: "These aren't the actions of a hero! This is torture! What kind of a man are you?"

Lan Jin didn't argue with me. He was absorbed in cutting off Ren Woxing's earlobe. When I saw that, I flew into a rage. I picked up the short sword and stabbed Ren Woxing through the heart, helping him to escape the suffering.

On the way back to the temple, Renshu and I voiced our strong displeasure with Lan Jin's ruthless methods. Actually, when Master saw us off, he had admonished us three times to hold back our power when fighting, and refrain from taking lives as much as possible. The purpose of the trip was to break up the horse thief gang, not to completely eradicate them. In those dark times of complete government corruption, many young people were forcefully conscripted into bandit gangs. Usually just taking out the leader was enough.

Lan Jin said nothing. His expression was empty, no different than usual. It seemed he wasn't listening at all to our scolding and admonishing. And so the three of us headed back to Huang Clan Village, the atmosphere between us very low.

When we arrived at Huang Clan Village, Renshu told Master and Master Uncles everything. Of course, Master Uncle Wang rebuked Lan Jin severely. But Lan Jin didn't seem to have any feeling about the matter at all. He sat quietly as Master Uncle Wang gave him a sound thrashing. He didn't resist or offer any argument.

In any case, we returned home to the village safely. Dad and Mom took me to the Li Clan Village to offer a marriage proposal to Hua Mao'er's

father. Ha. Matters between me and Hua Mao'er had been decided by the two villages long ago. And so our two families decided that next month, on the fifteenth, when the moon was full, we would marry. That day when we got engaged was the happiest time of my life. I smiled so hard even a sword couldn't wipe it from my face.

Two days after the engagement, Master received a message by carrier pigeon from Yingcai Peak. It said that Devil Sect leaders Tianshan Tonglao [91] and Lu Xiaofeng [92] had attacked the headquarters of our Heaven Reaching Sect. Master and Master Uncles were to return as quickly as possible to render assistance. And so Master and Master Uncle Zhang took me and Renshu back to the mountain. We left behind Master Uncle Wang and Lan Jin, who was still being punished, to protect the village.

As we left, Hua Mao'er stood like always in the trees by the village entrance. Her eyes red, she sang a love song, praying that I return safely, so that we could finally get married. As I rode on my swiftly galloping horse, I listened to Hua Mao'ers gentle singing voice, and I silently swore an oath that no matter how dangerous it got, I would return safely to the village!

When we got to Yingcai Peak, the battle raged fiercely. The auras of death were extremely fierce. If I had encountered such violent auras three years before, I wouldn't have been able to even stand up. But now, I had no choice but to ward off the blows of the savage disciples who attacked me.

Master and I charged across the hillside, which was inundated with sword auras. I used each and every technique I had learned in the past five years to knock down one enemy after another. But there were just too many of them, and they were too powerful. Six Martial Uncles died, all

extremely powerful martial arts masters, not to mention many fellow disciples of my generation.

Luckily, Master had already practiced Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand to its pinnacle. At a critical moment, he used three moves to strike down the great Devil Sect leader Tianshan Tonglao. Fifth Master Uncle sacrificed himself in a mutual palm attack with Lu Xiaofeng and they dropped dead together. With their leaders lost, our enemies fled down the mountain.

After the enemies retreated, I realized that my body was covered with wounds, and that I had sustained serious internal injuries. Only by relying on the memory of Hua Mao'er singing had I been able to fight calmly.

The great battle was concluded, but the Heaven Reaching Sect had suffered great casualties. The Founder commanded us to disperse in different directions to seek healing. This would prevent our enemies from returning to Yingcai Peak to seek revenge while we recovered. And so Master, Master Uncle Zhang, myself and Renshu decided to hurry back to Huang Clan Village to recuperate. All Sect members would all meet back at Yingcai Peak in one year.

Master had sustained injuries, but on the road back, he infused me with his most pure inner force to help me recover first. "We can't have a sick and feeble bridegroom," he said. "You need to be glowing with health, otherwise your mom and dad will blame me!"

Master Uncle Zhang and Renshu had also received injuries, but nothing very serious. We arrived back at Huang Clan Village on the fourteenth. The next day was my marriage to Hua Mao'er.

I rode on my horse, watching the Huang Clan Village gate getting closer and closer, and my heart surged with happiness. Master and Master Uncle were also very happy for me. But unexpectedly...

Master suddenly stopped talking at this point. Tears covered his face.

"What happened at the Huang Clan Village?" I felt somewhat frightened, even though Master was describing something that had happened long ago in the Ming Dynasty.

Master nodded his head. Wrapping his arms around me, he wailed, "All dead! Everyone in the Huang Clan Village, completely exterminated! Master Uncle Wang's head had been placed on the broken rock by the village gate. Both his eyes had been dug out!"

I held my grieving master. "How could it be?" I asked sadly. "Did your enemies find Huang Family Village?"

"At first," he said, crying, "Master and I thought that's what had happened. We never imagined that..."

"It was Lan Jin?" I asked, shocked.

Correct, it had been done by Lan Jin.

When we saw Master Uncle Wang's head at the village gate, we rode our horses into the village furiously. Corpses lay piled up everywhere. Dad

and mom, my brothers and sisters, ahhh... they sat on wooden benches outside the gate of our house, their posture in death horrifically miserable...

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[91] Tianshan Tonglao is a character from Demi-gods and Semi-devils by Jin Yong <http://tinyurl.com/nbge954>

[92] Lu Xiaofeng is the protagonist of a series of novels by Gu Long <http://tinyurl.com/pfkbzbe>

Lan Jin (5)

I was so shocked I couldn't even shed tears. I followed a panicked Master Uncle Zhang as he rushed toward his house. All we could see was that conscienceless, emotionless youth, standing next to the village well, slowly slashing my friend Li Daquan's face with his sword. Next to Lan Jin were many villagers, my childhood friends, slashed and cut up. The most horrific thing was that their acupuncture points had been sealed, stopping their bleeding. They were not dead, but they trembled and twitched uncontrollably. Their faces contained no expression of pain or suffering, only empty holes oozing dark blood.

"Lan Jin! You did this?!" I howled, drawing my sword.

"Yeah." Lan Jin concentration was focused on slicing off a small piece of Li Daquan's nose. He didn't pay much attention to me.

Master grabbed me, staring grimly at the cold and detached Lan Jin. "You killed your master?" he asked.

Lan Jin nodded impatiently, cutting off the rest of Li Daquan's nose, and I almost charged forward to try to kill him.

"Why?" said Master scathingly, grabbing me with one hand and Master Uncle Zhang with the other.

"To practice my sword technique." He kicked Li Daoquan to the ground, staring deeply at Master.

Master's hand gripped me tightly. I could sense him repressing a violent aura of death.

Lan Jin seemed completely without conscience, stepping on villagers who perched on the brink of death, coldly saying, "Come at me together."

"Wait a moment," Master said, anger in his voice. "What about Hua Mao'er?"

"What about my wife and children?" roared Master Uncle Zhang.

Lan Jin licked some blood off of his sword and began kicking over some of the gasping, dying villagers. He pointed at a woman, her face smeared with blood. "Here. And your son is probably inside the well."

Master Uncle Zhang let out a violent roar. Shaking off Master's hand, he leaped off of his horse and charged toward Lan Jin. The aura of the long sword in his hand enveloped Lan Jin like a screaming gale wind.

In the twinkling of an eye, my face was covered with blood, hot fresh blood.

Lan Jin crouched there, his head lowered, one hand touching the ground, the long sword in his other hand pointing up toward the dismal sky... a sky that rained red blood.

Master Uncle Zhang's head flew threw the air. His sword protruded from Lan Jin's shoulder, swaying back and forth.

I vaguely remember that in that fleeting moment when Master Uncle Zhang met his fate, when Lan Jin's lightning hand shot forth, a blue glow emanated from his eyes.

Master Uncle Zhang's head finally fell to the ground. I wiped the thick blood from my face. The entire time, Master's eyes were fixed directly on Lan Jin.

"Master Uncle, please forgive me!" Renshu, vomit spilling from his mouth, heeled his horse out of the village, trying to flee.

Unexpectedly, Lan Jin pulled the sword out from his shoulder and flung it toward the panic-stricken Renshu.

"What about Hua Mao'er!" howled Master. He knocked the flying sword down, snapping it in two, allowing Renshu to flee in his cowardice.

I stared anxiously at Lan Jin, thinking to myself: Hua Mao'er has always loved hiding. Maybe she's alright... maybe... maybe she's hiding in the forest...

Lan Jin sealed the acupuncture point in his shoulder, stopping the bleeding, then casually said, "I raped her."

My vision grew dark, and my head seemed about to explode. I was ready to leap off my horse, to death or life. I didn't care.

And then, I saw a smile appear on Lan Jin's face. "Just kidding," he said.

My heart loosened. Holding back my fury, I asked, "Where is she?"

His face suddenly grew dark. Coldly, he said, "Her left half is hanging from the big tree outside the village. Her right half is hanging from the gate of the Li Clan Village."

"Ahhh—"

My heart shattered. I was trying to shake off Master's heavy grip, when I suddenly realized the restraining hand was no longer there. Master shot toward Lan Jin like a violent arrow.

Whoosh!

A ripping sound could be heard, along with a heavy slashing sound.

Master held one hand over his neck. The sword in his other hand pointed toward the ground.

Like before, Lan Jin had one hand on the ground, his head lowered. His cold eyes stared at the tip of Master's sword.

On the tip of Master's sword could be seen a drop of blood.

On Lan Jin's chest could be seen a drop of blood.

I sat on my horse, not daring to move, fearing I might interrupt the rhythm of Master's attack.

"Why did you conceal your power?" Master quietly sealed the acupuncture points in his neck, but blood still seeped forth through the cracks between his fingers.

"I didn't conceal my power." Lan Jin slowly stopped the blood flowing from his chest. Then he continued, "My sword is made for killing, not practicing kung fu."

Master nodded. "Let me ask you another question. Why did you need to kill so many people?"

Lan Jin pointed his sword toward Master's eyes. "To practice my sword technique," he said slowly.

The placid tip of Master's sword pointed down toward his shadow on the ground.

The cold tip of Lan Jin's sword pointed directly at Master's face.

After that, the two swords disappeared, and my face was once again covered with blood.

In a blur, Master's sword seemed to adhere to Lan Jin's sword, then sweep it away. His palm struck out, landing on Lan Jin's chest. Crimson

blood vomited from Lan Jin's mouth and he flew backwards, flopping like a scarecrow and slamming into the well.

Howling, I leaped off the horse, my sword stabbing toward him furiously. His eyes glowed blue, and his finger stabbed out toward my chest. I flew back, feeling as if I had just been struck by lightning. My sword fell, stabbing into the ground, and blood gurgled forth from my chest.

And Master?

Master stared at Lan Jin, holding his hand over his chest, saying nothing.

Suddenly, thick, red blood flowed out from his Flying Dragon point.

Lan Jin gripped the edge of the well, his face covered in sweat. He struggled up, trying to pick up his sword from the ground. But then he toppled over, coughing up another mouthful of blood. It seemed Master's palm strike had been quite serious.

But Master could not have anticipated that as he landed his palm strike, Lan Jin, whose inner force was far inferior to his own, would imbue his sword with Qi. Even as the palm strike landed, he used Qi to grab the sword and stab it into Master's Flying Dragon point, a fatal strike.

I looked at Master's face, brittle like a sheet of metal, and then looked at Lan Jin, staggering toward a horse. I wanted to pursue him with my sword, strike him down, but I couldn't summon the energy. In the process

of receiving his serious injury, Lan Jin had used all the energy he could summon as well. My Qi was roiling out of control. Perhaps he had severed some of the arteries in my heart.

And so he struggled onto the horse, and slowly rode out of the village.

My tears flowed as I looked at the sun sinking in the west. Even if I was about to die, that was ok. Hua Mao'er and I were to be married tomorrow, and there would still be time to do so in the underworld...

Lan Jin (6)

Master, slowly dying, lurched over to me and then collapsed. I looked at him, and he laughed.

Weeping, I cried out, "Master..."

Master lay there, laughing quietly. He placed his hand onto my back, imbuing into me a stream of pure, matchless Qi. I was shocked. "Master," I blurted, "you..."

As bold and forthright as ever, Master said, "I owe you my life, and now I'm going to pay back what I owe."

Tears streamed from my eyes. Turning back to look at him, I said, "Hua Mao'er is dead. I can't go on living."

Staring into my eyes, Master said, "There is something in this world called justice..."

I nodded. This was something Master said all the time.

He continued, "You must ... you must continue on living. I'm not saying you should seek revenge ... but justice ... and justice requires outstanding kung fu..."

I cried as I circulated the life-saving Qi through my arteries. My mind thought back to the five years spent with my mighty, respected Master,

all the memories of five years, five years... Master had settled down in this land that I loved, just for me. But now, that very land was covered with mountains of corpses.

The large, strong hand on my back, finally dropped away slowly.

I ground my teeth. "Master!" I cried. "We will meet again in the afterlife of heroes!"

Thusly, in Huang Clan Village, amidst the evening wind and rivers of blood, beneath the setting sun, I kowtowed for the last time to Master, three times. A hearty smile hung on his face, which only increased the pain I felt.

"And Hua Mao'er?" I realized that I had started crying.

"Her left half really was hung on the big tree outside the village, and her right half in Li Clan Village." Master wailed. Mournfully, he said, "The Li Clan village had also been slaughtered."

Fury welled up as I thought of a beautiful young girl being slashed in two. It was truly unimaginable.

So ruthless.

His body trembling, Master continued, "I circulated my Qi to heal myself, and began digging graves for everyone. One large grave for each family. It took no less than nineteen days to bury everyone in the two villages. Afterwards, I held vigil upon Hua Mao'er's grave for a month. In

the end, I sang that love song she liked so much, then took up my sword and heeled my horse out of the village.”

Spellbound, Ah Yi asked, “Did you find Lan Jin?”

Master shook his head. “I was no match for Lan Jin. So I found a secluded place where I diligently practiced all of the knowledge Master had imparted to me. Ai. Luckily, Master had transferred into me a seemingly infinite stream of pure Qi. Not only did I recover fully from my internal injuries, but my power base increased dramatically. I trained hard day and night, very hard. I practiced palm techniques on the seafloor, flying techniques amongst towering trees, used scores of different poisonous snakes to practice Qi techniques. And to serve the fortunes of the people, I would occasionally take the heads of some government dogs.”

Ah Yi and I couldn’t tell whether Master was talking nonsense or not, but we listened attentively.

“One year later, my martial arts were mastered, and I ascended Yingcai Peak to reunite with the Founder and my Master Uncles. I planned to discuss with them Lan Jin’s betrayal of the Sect. But to my surprise, when I arrived at our Sect’s mountain, I saw several Master Uncles seated formally around a large, round table. Their bodies were riddled with gaping wounds. Their acupuncture points had all been sealed or stabbed, and their bodies were soaked with blood. Their faces ... Ai, I do not wish to even mention it. Their eyeballs lay on the table, and their faces were slashed to ribbons. When I laid eyes on the scene I wailed.” The veins in Master’s eyes bulged. “When I wailed,” he said, “the Master Uncles suddenly convulsed, and made strange gurgling sounds. As it turned out, Lan Jin had blocked their blood circulation, the way he usually did, leaving them torn to pieces, but unable to die! I shouted ‘Jun’er will

avenge you!' and stabbed each and every one through the heart with my short sword."

Master leaned against me wearily. Sighing, he said, "I searched the mountain all afternoon and finally encountered the Founder, laying beneath an ancient tree. He was one-hundred and two years old. He had not received any humiliations from that dog bastard, but there were deep sword wounds on his shoulder and chest."

"Founder!" I shouted, "your grand-disciple Jun'er has arrived!" I knelt in front of him.

Propped up against the old tree, he opened his eyes. When he saw it was me, he smiled weakly. "Worthy disciple was trained personally by Jiexuan, compassionate and righteous. A weighty task will now fall on your shoulders."

I held back my tears, looking at Master's wounds. The bloodstains had long since turned dark. "Grand-disciple will rid the martial world of this great evil. I will avenge our Sect!"

The Founder frowned. "Do not seek revenge for the Sect. Constant seeking of revenge will cause turmoil in Jianghu. That son-of-a-***** Lan Jin's martial arts are devilishly fierce. What revenge could you seek? Wouldn't you just be delivering up your life?"

I felt unsure. "Don't tell me I shouldn't seek revenge at all?" I said loudly. "My Master, my Master Uncles, they all died so horribly!"

With a trace of irritation, the Founder said, "If Lan Jin has a problem with our Sect and wipes us out, what is the harm? But if he harms innocent people, or brings misfortune to our country, you must stop him even if you must sacrifice your life to do so! Your martial arts are not to be used for revenge! They are to be used to preserve divine justice! You must put your personal interests behind you, do you understand?"

Ashamed, I knelt in front of the Founder, speechless, tears streaming from my eyes.

The Founder sighed. "Lan Jin's natural ability is freakishly high. I fear that a talent like him has never before been seen in Jianghu. At such a young age, his sword technique is abnormally profound. His movement techniques are as fast as lightning. When you add a deep understanding of the martial arts of our Sect, it really is first-rate... Had I not used a hundred years of carefully established inner force to land a palm strike on his back, I too would have fallen victim to his violent treachery. After I hurt the little bastard, he fled with serious internal injuries. But you are still not his match. Don't be too anxious to serve yourself up to death."

I looked at the Founder. He struggled for breath, on the brink of dying. I shot out my hand and rested it on his Flying Dragon point, then began imbuing my own Qi into his Qi reservoir. Unexpectedly, he grabbed my hand, and I felt an exceedingly powerful Qi rushing back into my palm, like tidewaters pouring into my Qi reservoir.

"Founder?" I called out in shock.

"This old man is soon going to return to heaven. What good is it to try to take anything with me? Take it, take it! Take it for the common people!" The Founder gripped my hand tightly. The pure inner force poured into

me, and a great responsibility came to rest on my shoulders.

Lan Jin (7)

Enough time passed to burn half an incense stick. The Founder rose to his feet wearily, swaying back and forth.

I wanted to help him, but he indicated for me to stay sit and let the Qi to be thoroughly absorbed. So I closed my eyes and allowed every drop of the Founder's matchless inner force, cultivated over a hundred years, to soak into my acupuncture points. By the time I opened my eyes again, the sky had grown dark, and I saw the Founder sitting cross-legged underneath an ancient tree, peaceful in death.

I took to heart the Founder's admonition, and did not chase after the cold-blooded Lan Jin.

I roamed Jianghu, fighting evils and relentlessly practicing the Heaven Reaching arts. When I grew weary, I would return to the bleak and dreary Huang Clan Village. I would sit upon Hua Mao'er's grave, chat with her and sing songs. Heavens! I missed her so much! My poor wife, who had never even had the chance to marry. Little yellow chrysanthemums covered her grave. I would often sleep next to her tombstone, and in my dreams I would see her sitting on the chrysanthemums singing, blushing as she stared at me.

A year later, the seven great schools of Jianghu were completely exterminated in a month's time. The bloodless corpses of the Seven Heroes of Wudang were strung up in the bamboo forest outside of Zhenwu Temple. The sound of the cold wind blowing through the holes in their bodies, making whistling sounds like a flute, was enough to make one's hair stand on end. Ai. Daoist Master Zhang Sanfeng [93] just stood

in the bamboo forest laughing crazily. The saddest thing of all was that his legs and arms had been hacked off.

And the pre-eminent Shaolin Temple?

The Shaolin Eighteen Copper Heroes were nailed to the huge plaque above the gates of the temple. The Wooden Men Alley became the Dead Men Alley. Surprisingly, the Dragon Subduing, Tiger Taming 18 Arhats actually kept their lives. Except, their heads were strung together with a chain like a blood-soaked prayer bead necklace. They wailed insanely all day like deranged spirits. The shouting was truly painful.

There's no need to even mention Emei, Mount Hua, Diancang, Kongtong, Wulong and other schools [94]. They were all completely slaughtered by Lan Jin. Among the two hundred nuns of Emei Sect, a handful managed to escape with their lives, but when they returned and saw their temple packed full with grotesque corpses, they went insane and could never speak again.

In that year, the people of Jianghu gave a nickname to Lan Jin. They called him "Cold Butcher." Any place "Cold Butcher" went became a hellish sea of blood.

Two years later, not many in Jianghu knew who "Cold Butcher" was, what he was, and what he did. Because there wasn't much of a Jianghu any more... almost everyone had been chopped into living corpses by "Cold Butcher."

In another two years, the followers of the five evil sects were eliminated by Lan Jin, and the word Jianghu became a part of history. The good and

evil paths of martial arts were gone, and the profound mysteries of kung fu were washed away with blood.

And me?

Five years after the bloody-soaked tragedy at the Huang Clan Village, I made a shocking advancement in my training. The most important thing was that after meticulous study of hundreds of sword methods, I transcended the foundation of Heaven Reaching Sword technique and created my own palm and sword skills, which were earth-shatteringly powerful. I was finally confident enough to take on Lan Jin. So I teamed up with the only two remaining top-notch experts of the martial world; the Iron Lock Savage Li Xunhuan [95], and the Devil Sect's Elegant Dandy, You Danzhi [96]. We followed Lan Jin's path of vicious slaughter, finally tracking him down to ancient Xi'an [97].

When we arrived in Xi'an, we thought it would take some time to determine his exact location. We never imagined that when practicing our Qi arts at the foot of a desolate mountain, we would suddenly sense a raging aura of death coming from the north. It was without a doubt Lan Jin, so we took to our feet and ran like mad. And finally we found him, in a yellow cloud of dust, slaughtering a company of government troops.

Li Xunhuan attacked first. His fellow disciples had all been cut down like swine by Lan Jin. His famous iron lock flew forward, backed by all his fury. But Lan Jin could sense that he was about to fall victim of a sneak attack, and with a wave of his sword he knocked aside the iron lock. Therefore, I took the opportunity to attack him with all of my power, launching a palm strike at his back. He dodged, and met my palm with his.

My body had been imbued with the Founder's hundred years of power,

as well as my Master's, so in terms of inner force, I was clearly the superior. My strike sent Lan Jin flying backwards, whereupon he slammed into a loess outcropping. A very ironic situation thus developed between Lan Jin and I...

Lan Jin hadn't been hit by the complete power of my strike. Instead, he redirected the majority of the energy of our mutual palm strikes backwards. He slammed into the loess outcropping, and it collapsed on top of him. In an instant, Lan Jin was engulfed in soil.

A world-class expert could never be crushed or smothered to death by an outcropping of loess [99]. So we oh-so-carefully focused our senses on the Qi aura emanating from within the soil, ready for Lan Jin to leap out at any moment. But after time passed, enough to drink a cup of tea, the Qi grew more and more faint, and soon we could barely sense it at all.

You Danzhi's demonic arts were unparalleled. After using his Grand Hearing technique, he said, "Lan Jin's Qi aura is not growing fainter, it's going deeper. He's digging a hole."

I felt confused. "Lan Jin isn't the type of person to dig holes. He just knows how to face off against people and kill them."

"Then he must be seriously injured!" cried Li Xunhuan. "He wants to dig himself out and escape."

You Danzhi, whose wife's body had been hung underneath a waterfall by Lan Jin, shrieked crazily: "It's not that easy!" He used the secret Devil Sect art "Lake Sucking Skill," and in an instant, all the fallen dirt and stone was removed. There could be seen a deep hole leading down.

"It doesn't make sense!" said Li Xunhuan suspiciously. "That punk couldn't dig a hole this big so quickly."

"It must have been here in the outcropping all along," said You Danzhi. "How could he be so lucky?" Holding his fan in hand, he squatted down and stared down into the blackness of the hole.

I was quite confident in the power of palm strike just now. For him to avoid facing off against us meant Lan Jin must be injured. I sighed. "Don't tell me God is helping the Cold Butcher by preparing a means of escape for him hundreds of years ago."

Li Xunhuan pulled out a hundred-foot long refined steel chain and cast it down into the dark hole. "He's not coming up! Let's go down! Deliver him up to death!"

"Okay!" said You Danzhi and I in unison.

Next, the three of us slowly climbed down into the dark hole. Li Xunhuan's Pure Steel Chain, imbued with Qi and swinging like a pendulum, descended ahead of us down into the darkness, carving out a path, ensuring that we wouldn't fall into any traps laid by Lan Jin.

As we went down, the darkness in the cavern grew thicker. Finally, not long later, the light from outside was completely gone. Everything was pitch black. The air in the dirt tunnel grew thick and dirty. It was nauseating. We circulated our inner force and slowed our breathing almost completely.

[93] Zhang Sanfeng is credited with creating Taiqi, and also is an important character in Heavenly Sword and Dragon Saber
<http://tinyurl.com/ozubelu>

[94] Here is information about the various schools and sects mentioned: Emei <http://tinyurl.com/mhguuvx>, Mount Hua <http://tinyurl.com/qchlbtu>, Diancang (couldn't find any English articles), Kongtong <http://tinyurl.com/q2ulwhz>, Wulong (not sure if this is from existing fiction or if the author made it up.)

[95] Li Xunhuan is a major protagonist of Gu Long novels
<http://tinyurl.com/l8helhg>

[96] You Danzhi is a character from Demi-Gods and Semi-Devil's
<http://tinyurl.com/odrbwgn>

[97] Xi'an is city in China with a very long history, and also where much of my translation Heroes Shed No Tears takes place
<http://tinyurl.com/6n2z3c>

[98] Loess is a type of sediment common in parts of North China
<http://tinyurl.com/yfn6tf8>

Not a ray of light shone in the cavern. We dropped into the stagnant darkness, a darkness within which waited a callous killer.

The thick, foul air must have been filled with poisons gasses, bottled up for who knew how many years. The three of us didn't dare open our mouths to breath deeply. But presumably Lan Jin felt the same. No one could breath in such abomination. Clinging to this assumption, we continued to climb down, regardless of what waited for us... The clacking of the metal chain against the dirt walls was quite unsettling.

Suddenly, we could tell from the sound of the chain that it had reached the bottom.

We hesitated for a moment, and then Li Xunhuan jumped down. He swung his metal chain in a wide circle, defining an area of safety, after which You Danzhi and I jumped down.

It was just as dark at the bottom, the air even more foul. I felt at the slow-matches [99] I had concealed in robe and thought to myself: if I ignited one of them, there would surely be an explosion; the air here was clearly more toxic than a miasma. But that would be fine. When the crucial moment came, Lan Jin and I could perish together.

After paying attention attentively for a moment, it was evident we were in some subterranean otherworld. From the sounds emitted by the metal chain, we could tell we were in a very wide space. Because we were holding our breaths, we couldn't speak. But our thinking was the same. We slowly followed the whirling sound of Li Xunhuan's metal chain.

Our imaginations could not conceive how to face a bloodthirsty enemy in this choking atmosphere. How horrific! At that time I truly felt that death would be an escape, and yet I felt no comfort in the constrictive darkness.

It seemed as if Lan Jin were a part of the blackness, that at any moment he could reach out and swallow us up. Perhaps it was destiny to face off against the greatest evil in such evil surroundings, to contend with darkness within darkness.

“Ding ding ding, ding ding ding, ding ding ding, ding ding ding, ding ding ding, ding ding ding...”

The rhythmic sound of the metal chain rang out in the cave. It was the only thing that didn't belong to the darkness.

But.

The sound of the chain suddenly stopped.

I gripped my sword tightly, not daring to move.

Even though it occurred in the briefest moment of time, I definitely heard the sound of a sharp sword slitting a throat.

Li Xunhuan was dead.

Next, I hardened my heart and entered a word of “stability.” Moments later I heard a thump. Li Xunhuan had fallen.

You Danzhi was completely silent.

We both knew that if we wanted to live a moment longer in this darkness, we had to kill Lan Jin.

And yet, we couldn’t make a sound, and must suppress any hint of an aura of death.

The sound of Li Xunhuan’s metal chain had betrayed his position, and betrayed his life.

What an unforgiving darkness.

I could not see Lan Jin, nor could I see You Danzhi. But, Lan Jin could not see us either.

We all waited for an opportunity.

An opportunity to attack.

I coolly searched for Lan Jin’s aura of death, but sadly he was repressing his just as we were, waiting for a chance to end this predestined face-off.

Seconds passed. Minutes. Time seemed to pass very slowly in the

darkness. When holding one's breath for the time it takes two incense sticks to burn, time's progress seemed even slower.

In a struggle of life and death which lacks auras of death, lacks light and shadow, the opportunity to attack came down to breathing.

Whoever breathed first, would die.

In this aspect, I seemed to have the best advantage, thanks to the Founder's hundred years of inner force, as well as my Master's. Also, Lan Jin had entered the cave a bit before us, as much time as it takes to drink a cup of tea.

I focused my thoughts, preparing to demonstrate the unique palm and sword techniques I had created.

"Now!"

You Danzhi shouted, unable to withstand the pain of holding his breath. The fan in his hand swept through the air.

Splash!

Something hot spattered across my face, presumably fresh blood.

Lan Jin had attacked.

On the left.

My sword stabbed out!

Success!

"You are more powerful."

"Your death is certain."

Lan Jin's voice seemed far and near at the same time. Both on the left and the right. The four words he'd spoken seemed to come from nineteen different angles. It seemed he'd used some strange movements to conceal himself in the darkness.

I was sure that I had stabbed his left shoulder, I couldn't be mistaken.

Using a swift movement technique, I changed positions, lightly brandishing my sword.

"I'll ask you again. Why did you slaughter the Sect for no reason?" I focused my thoughts, ready to sacrifice myself in an attack.

"To practice my sword technique." As soon as he spoke, I felt the sharp aura of a sword pressing toward my back.

This truly was a frightening duel!

I spun and blocked with my sword, and a bloody glow erupted between the two swords. It glittered unceasingly, revealing our two bodies, and a set of devilish blue eyes.

Lan Jin's sword, cold and merciless, stabbed from every direction at once. It was almost unbelievable. Instead of defending myself, I stabbed out rapidly at his vital points, hoping only to meet death along with him. And yet, our swords crossed repeatedly, the clear and melodious dinging of metal against metal sounding out endlessly. The sword auras roiled.

Lan Jin's expression was cold and fearsome, but slowly, astonishment began to appear.

Ever since the time he'd slaughtered the villages, not many had been able to cross swords with him successfully.

But my sword was a swift one, its speed tempered in the reefs at the bottom of the sea.

It moved faster and faster, and finally pierced Lan Jin's defense, stabbing into his neck.

Lan Jin, his eyes opened wide, shot his finger out into the air, carrying sword-like Qi.

Ignoring the risk of the finger attack, I tossed away my sword and sent a palm strike toward the top of his skull. A fatal attack!

"Lan Jin died?!" I felt somewhat uneasy, fearing the great prince of devils would still struggle on.

"Look." The palm of Master's left hand flashed in front of my eyes. There could be seen two horrific red scars, about the size of coins, right in the middle of his palm.

Master sighed. "At the critical moment, Lan Jin shot sword aura toward my palm strike, and stabbed it through my hand."

Ah Yi's mouth hung open. "And then what?"

Master didn't say anything more. His eyes were filled with deep puzzlement.

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[99] I couldn't find much information about slow-matches in English. In fact I couldn't even find a pre-existing translation of the expression. Basically, it's a sort of match, similar to a very slow burning fuse, which could be used to carry a spark around for a long period of time. When blown on, the spark would flare up, allowing you to make a fire.

A long time passed. Master shook his head and said, "We shall stop here for today."

Ah Yi and I found it hard to accept that just when we reached the pinnacle of the story, it was time to stop. Ah Yi said, "Master, if you have something to say, just say it!"

Master knocked him on the head and said, "What happened next is really impossible to believe. Perhaps it is the reason why people think I am a fool, so..." He wiped his face dry of tears and said, "We will talk about it later."

That night, Master didn't mention any more of his illusory stories of the past. He absorbed himself in teaching Ah Yi how to circulate Qi through the acupuncture points. As for me, I contended with the venoms of a hundred-pacer snake, a green bamboo viper and an Eastern Russell's viper to increase my strength. [100]

An hour passed, and Master shook me. I opened my eyes, and a black mist emanated from the middle of my palm.

"Does this kid really have superhuman intelligence?" he asked me suspiciously. Ah Yi stood by looking embarrassed. It seemed he was incapable of comprehending the profound secrets of Qi manipulation.

"It's always like this at the beginning," I said earnestly. Master could only stand up and continue to direct the hammer-dull Ah Yi.

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[100] Here are the three types of snakes: hundred-pacer
<http://tinyurl.com/kqnhs5r>, green bamboo snake
<http://tinyurl.com/n5stbn9>, Eastern Russel's viper
<http://tinyurl.com/l5yt5c9>

Part 4

When Master threw the iron balls out into the sea, why did I go out into the freezing water like an idiot? Why use such a dangerous method to practice martial arts? This kind of thing was just like Master's fantasies, strangely transmitted from three-hundred years ago into the modern age. It was lunacy. To return to the topic at hand, perhaps practicing martial arts Master's way would lead to fire deviation. Letting more than twenty types of venomous snakes bite me was just as insane as looking for iron balls in the sea.

Seafloor (1)

From now on, Ah Yi came every night to practice kung fu. As the inner force in our bodies continued to grow, our grades continued to slip lower and lower. No, mine slipped. Ah Yi's couldn't get any lower.

Several days later, Mom ran her hands across the sword marks on the wall in disbelief and "Klunk!" My room officially had only two walls left.

And then winter officially arrived. Every night, the inner force in my body would automatically circulate through my acupuncture points, and I would fall asleep, warm and comfortable in the frigid, biting wind. If my kung fu kept developing this way, my first official profession might be selling blankets.

Two months passed, and finally I heard Ah Yi cry out crazily in class. It seemed he'd finally gotten the knack of it.

"You two are so cartoonish," said Ah Lun. "If I hadn't seen Yuan Zai's moves, I'd die before believing that you two practice martial arts."

I tried to get Ah Lun to come train with us, but he had no interest in it whatsoever. Although, there was one thing he was curious about: When would we be able to destroy the school's Chiang Kai-shek statue? [101]

"Are you cold?" I gripped Yi Jing's little hand. There was a cold spell now, and it was about ten degrees celsius. [102]

"Nope... Your inner force is getting stronger and stronger, isn't it?" Yi Jing laughed. Her dimples were so cute.

"You can tell?" I said. "I guess I really do have a lot of natural talent. At least, a lot more talent than I do in studying."

"You really don't want to study any more?" She would ask me this question a lot, and would always look very concerned.

"I don't know," I would laugh bitterly. "Maybe I won't study any more, or maybe after a while I will. We'll see."

Whenever Yi Jing posed this question, it left me a bit puzzled.

For a first year middle school student in 1987, what was the point of relentlessly pursuing high level martial arts?

If Master showed off all the astonishing abilities, he would be world famous and make huge amounts of money. But he truly believed that the real value of kung fu was not in gaining a reputation, but in justice. He really was like a cartoon character.

Therefore, Master forbade us from showing off our kung fu to anyone. "In this world," he said, "Very few people truly understand kung fu. It is all because of the year that Lan Jin destroyed the legacies of Jianghu. But, it is what it is. If villains understood martial arts, it would be a disaster for the common people."

"So we're the only people left who can do martial arts?" asked Ah Yi. "That will make it much easier to defend the country and save our fellow countrymen."

"Correct. Later on, you must select some kind, merciful and brave disciples, and pass down the responsibility of upholding justice from generation to generation." Master patted Ah Yi on the head.

"Hei hei. When can I start getting rid of bullies and bringing peace to the innocent?" said Ah Yi excitedly. "Whenever I see a group of thugs, it puts me in a really bad mood!"

"You are too gung-ho!" Master gave a hard knock on Ah Yi's head. "If you casually show off your kung fu to people, I will disable your tendons and arteries!"

"Ai..." I couldn't stop from saying, "Master, in modern society we have policemen, they have guns, and they enforce the law. It's not our place to be heroes."

With contempt, Master said, "You can lump those constables together with thieves. Every dynasty is the same in this regard."

Ah Yi and I could only laugh bitterly.

1987. Winter break. Master took Ah Yi and I to the seaside in Wang Gong [103]. Yi Jing walked behind us uneasily, holding a metal container of ginger tea.

This was the first time Yi Jing watched us practice martial arts. Master had made a special exception to allow it.

"Master, today is new years eve!" [104] I stripped off my clothes and stood in the desolate sea breeze, looking at Yi Jing.

"Master, I'm really freaking cold!" Ah Yi's teeth chattered. He'd also taken off his clothes, and stood trembling in under the dead, gray sky.

"Ah Yi, you fool," said Master loudly, "Circulate your inner force to keep out the cold!"

"Master, I must report," he said guiltily, "Disciple doesn't have enough inner force!"

"Master," I chimed in, "Let's do this after the new year! The sea will still be here next year, it won't run off!"

Master rapped our heads. "With such a pretty girl here watching," he cursed, "how could you have the face to shrink back?"

I looked at the towering waves crashing against the seashore, the foam surging, and couldn't stop myself from begging for mercy. "Master, we'll die!"

"Look at how big the waves are!" Ah Yi hurriedly echoed. "Anyone would be swept away. There's a one-hundred percent chance we'll die!"

Master kicked the two of us in the direction of the sea until we stood in water up to our knees.

"We're going to die!" I cried. "Master!" I looked at Yi Jing, standing on the shore looking quite frightened.

"I had 25 different poisonous snakes bite you. Did you die?" Master grabbed me and Ah Yi. "Listen, you two," he shouted. "Ah Yi, before you step foot back on shore you're going to find this metal box. Otherwise I will smack you back to your hometown!"

He pulled out a New Years Egg Roll gift box and tossed it out into the sea. The gift box flew into the water, about twenty-five meters or so out [105]. It was filled with rocks, so it sank down instantly.

With a long face, Ah Yi grabbed Master, getting ready to kneel down.

"If you do not get out there quickly," said Master mercilessly, "the box will be swept away by the waves. How will you get it then?"

Ah Yi gritted his teeth and then yelled, "Master!"

"What now?" Master yelled back.

"If I die," roared Ah Yi, "then my ghost will come looking for you!" With that, he walked slowly forward into the sea.

"Sink your Qi into the Long White point and Long Black point in your feet," reminded Master from behind. "Hold your breath and focus your spirit. Go slowly, one step at a time! Do not fear the undercurrent! As long as your feet are solidly connected to the ground, you will not be swept away!"

Ah Yi could only hunch his head down toward the sea and yell, "If I die, I'm coming for you!"

And then he sank down to the seafloor.

I saw Yi Jing off in the distance shaking her head violently, and then looked at Master. "Master," I said, "I'll go save Ah Yi and then come back!"

Master grabbed me, and from within his garment produced a pair of rusty iron balls. "Ah Yi's metal box is really close. Don't worry. As for you..." As he spoke, Master flung the iron balls away. They flew far, far out into the white waves, then fell deep into the deep blue.

[101] I'm sure most people who have even just heard about Taiwan know who Chiang Kai-shek is <http://tinyurl.com/qm42w>

[102] 10 degrees celsius is about 50 degrees fahrenheit

[103] Wang Gong is located in Fangyuan Township, a rural township of Chuanghua county. <http://tinyurl.com/ob3489n>

[104] Chinese New Years Eve, not December 31. I checked, and Lunar new year in 1987 fell on January 31.

[105] 25 meters is a little over 80 feet

Seafloor (2)

Staring stupidly, I said, "That's at least 200 meters!" [106]

"You can do it," Master smiled.

"I can't do it!" I cried.

He laughed heartily. "Your body's inner force is already quite good. You can do it!"

I was about to start crying. "Throw it again, a little closer!"

Master slapped my shoulder and then whispered into my ear: "Hey, silly boy! I threw it a little farther on purpose. It will give you a chance to impress the girl. Get in to the sea and show off your talents."

"Master," I said miserably, "You threw it far on purpose? Are you saying ... the distance is really ... too far for me?"

"Even though it is a bit far," he said with a laugh, "it will be very impressive."

With that, he pushed me forward into the water.

I slipped, and felt a pain on the bottom of my foot. It turned out a sharp rock protruding from the reef had gashed my foot.

I could only take a deep breath and sink down into the sea.

Under the sea in winter, I had no other option but to circulate my inner force to generate heat.

I couldn't open my eyes. It's not that I was afraid of the water. Rather, the rushing undercurrent really made it impossible for me to open them.

If I couldn't see, how could I find the damned iron balls? Where should I even start looking?

It was too late to start thinking about it, because at the moment, just figuring out how to stand firmly on the seafloor had become an advanced field of study for me. The undercurrent was even stronger and more frightening than the breaking waves on the surface. With two forces relentlessly pushing and sucking at me, I had to use seventy percent of my inner force just to be able to stand in one place. If I wanted to move forward, it took one hundred percent of my power!

Walking on the seafloor... I really don't know how to describe how frightening it is. Maybe it's even as frightening as it was for Master to face off against Lan Jin in the cave that year. I endured greater and greater pressure as I crept forward along the seafloor. As I walked, I thought about three questions.

The first question was, had I gone crazy?

When Master threw the iron balls out into the sea, why did I go out into

the freezing water like an idiot? Why use such a dangerous method to practice martial arts? This kind of thing was just like Master's dreams, strangely transmitted from three-hundred years ago into the modern age. It was lunacy.

To return to the topic at hand, perhaps practicing martial arts Master's way will lead to fire deviation. Letting more than twenty types of venomous snakes bite me was just as insane as looking for iron balls in the sea.

The second question was, if it was so difficult for me on the seafloor, what about Ah Yi?

If you calculate the level of my inner force using the Heaven Reaching Sect's unique formula, it was about twenty-five venomous snakes. As for Ah Yi's inner force, he had been stuck at three venomous snakes for quite a while. If I was struggling so hard to move forward, Ah Yi must surely be out of air.

On the bus ride to Wang Gong, Ah Yi and I had tested how long we could hold our breaths. I could hold mine for 23 minutes, Ah Yi only seven. Ai. It was good that Ah Yi's New Year Egg Roll gift box hadn't been thrown very far. If he couldn't hold it, at least he could swim to the surface to take a breath of air.

The third question was, did I have the ability to find the iron balls?

As part of my martial arts training, Master had allowed venomous snakes to bite me, after which I forced the venom out. But he had always been there, secretly taking care of me ... but this time ... I should be able

to find the iron balls safely, right? Maybe Master was right behind me, following me secretly, taking care of Ah Yi and I. My little life should be taken care of properly.

Therefore, I quickly started trying to figure out a way to locate the iron balls, and avoid letting Master down.

The seafloor. The arduous seafloor.

With extreme effort, I forced my eyes open, but all I could see was roiling blue.

How far had I walked?

I looked up. It seemed like the surface of the water was very, very far away. At that time, I hadn't started studying trigonometry yet, so I didn't understand the steps necessary to calculate the distance between me and the iron balls based on the distance and angle of the surface. I was slowly started to feel more and more uncomfortable. The pain of holding my breath filled my acupuncture points, and the undercurrent constantly battered against my chest. My inner force was reaching its limit.

And then, I reached an area I definitely would not continue into.

An oceanic trench.

It was an extremely dark and terrifying area.

I couldn't see the bottom. I could only sense a mighty vortex of tidewater screaming out from within the trench. It was like the hell of the ocean, an abrupt fissure in the seafloor, a bottomless pit. If I hadn't opened my eyes, I would have fallen in and been devoured.

My strength was spent.

If I tried to reach the surface to take a breath, I would definitely be swept away, because Master hadn't taught us how to swim. So I decided to head back.

But just as I had resolved to turn around, I suddenly saw something fly by in front of me.

It was a person, clutching a gift box in hand.

It was Ah Yi!

I saw him, his limbs limp, being swept along by the current, like a dazed cricket being dragged by a giant hand. I suddenly felt completely helpless. Ah Yi would be buried in the ocean trench any second!

Moments before, my strength had run out, but now my courage had redoubled. My iron gaze fixed on Ah Yi, about to be sucked by the vortex into the ocean trench. Allowing myself to be carried along by the wild force of the tide, I dashed toward the trench, flying forward with each surge. Finally, I reached the edge and went in a bit, I think, and grabbed the swooning Ah Yi. I circulated my non-existent inner force and painstakingly climbed up out of the oceanic abyss.

I clutched Ah Yi and walked along the seafloor, my thoughts in disorder. As I walked, I searched frustratedly for Master, who should have been there to watch over us. My inner force was already thoroughly depleted. The only thing keeping me going was the fact that Ah Yi had almost died.

Maybe Master couldn't find us?

Or, was Master just not watching over us at all?

I had no energy. I could only hold Ah Yi and drop to my knees in the frigid seawater.

There was only one thing I could do...

Master, I beg you to find us!

I clenched my fists, trying to recall Uncle Wang's disgusting face and emit a savage aura of death.

Kill!

"You are alright."

I opened my eyes. A hot flame flickered within my body.

A slight smile covered Master's face. He sat next to me, one hand on Ah

Yi, one hand on me. I looked at Ah Yi next to me. His face was pale white, his lips purple and slightly parted. I wanted to call out his name, but all I could spit out was a mouthful of saltwater.

Ah Yi opened his eyes. Weakly, he said, "Thanks, Master, you inhuman little..."

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[106] 200 meters is about 650 feet

Seafloor (3)

I nodded, spit out a mouthful of saltwater, and weakly said, "Master?"

"I saw a shark swimming toward a group of anglers," he replied apologetically. "I was worried the shark would hurt someone, so I went over to drive it away. When I looked back, you two were nowhere to be seen. The sea was very murky, so I was extremely nervous. Luckily, you sent out your aura of death, so I knew where you were and could drag you to the shore."

My eyes glared. "Go to hell, Master," I said.

Red-faced, he replied, "There is no need to bring it up again. It is Master's fault."

Yi Jing sat next to me, her eyes red. "I don't want to watch you practice martial arts ever again. I was frightened to death."

Master removed his hand from our backs. "You are alright," he said. "Continue to circulate your Qi and drink some ginger tea. You will be fine." He placed his hands on the metal container of ginger tea, using his inner force to transfer heat inside and warm it up.

Trembling all over, Ah Yi and I drank the hot tea and watched the waves surge amidst the sinister looking sea. With a forced smile, I said, "Hei hei, it's a thousand times more scary inside than outside."

Ah Yi shrunk inward and nodded. "You're right. If I have to go down there again... just kill me."

I looked at the steam rising from the ginger tea and grasped Yi Jing's hand. "Yeah. I'll die before I go down again."

Master sat there guiltily, saying nothing.

And yet incredibly, a few days later, Ah Yi and I were back in the sea walking around, looking for whatever heavy things Master randomly tossed out. Why? Perhaps, I thought, it was because we were all lunatics.

As for that New Year's Eve, after saying farewell to Ah Yi and Yi Jing, I dragged master back home with me to eat Reunion dinner [107]. That Reunion dinner turned into one of the most unforgettable New Year's Eves in my life.

Dad still hadn't returned to Taiwan. The house was packed with a bunch of crazy relatives and guests, even that utterly detestable Uncle Wang. Three large tables had been set up in the living room, covered with the sumptuous New Year's Eve dinner. The loser adults smoked and chatted. A dozen or so random kids who I didn't even know rolled around next to the sofa pretending to be Gold Lion, Silver Lion [108] and other such TV characters. Everyone was talking and laughing; I was a complete outsider.

I stood next to the dining table, but after realizing there was no place for me, I decided to grab a few plates of food from the kitchen, drag Master upstairs, and have a comfortable Reunion dinner with him in the "cave."

But once we stepped foot onto the staircase, Mom spotted us.

"Yuan Zai! Come eat Reunion dinner!" When she saw Master behind me, she said, "Teacher, why don't you eat with us?"

With utmost courtesy, Master cupped his hands before his chest and made a slight bow. He gave me a look that indicated we should go down to eat. I grabbed him resentfully and took him over to stand next to the table of loser adults.

"Where did you go today, Yuan Zai? You're filthy! Aiya, you as well, Teacher. You look just that same as Yuan Zai. Haha." Fat Auntie Zhang looked at us, and with a fake smile, dragged a chair from the corner for me to sit it. I just looked at it. She dragged over another chair for Master. Two stinking salted fish who had just climbed up out of the ocean squeezed their way into the already packed table.

It was a truly terrible Reunion dinner.

The stench emanating from Master and I filled the living room. Minding my own business, I got some food for Master, and the two of us started eating silently. Everyone at the table frowned. "Yuan Zai," Mom blurted, "You and your teacher go shower, and then come back to eat, okay?"

I looked at Master. He nodded, red-faced, and the both of us stood up to go take showers.

"So stinky," laughed Uncle Wang.

I stopped walking.

I looked at his fat face out of the corner of my eye, which seemed to make him a bit uneasy. He let out a loud laugh and said, "I heard Yuan Zai's grades haven't been very good lately. Hei hei. Hopefully his Teacher can help him a bit more."

My sharp eyes fixed on Uncle Wang's dirty hand, which was currently on Mom's thigh.

I glanced at Master, and then, without asking his permission, walked over to Uncle Wang.

With a cheeky grin, he said, "Yuan Zai, are you really coming over so soon to ask for a red envelope?" [109] As he spoke, he placed his hand on my shoulder and rubbed it affectionately.

"Uncle Wang." I looked at the fat pig coldly.

"Good boy," he said with a dainty laugh.

"Burn in hell!"

"Ah?"

I grabbed Uncle Wang's hand and slowly twisted it. There were no ridiculous cracking sounds, but the pig's hand snapped. [110] On the table was a hotpot, already half cold. I picked it up and slowly poured it

over Uncle Wang's head. With his hand in such pain, he dared not move, and could only allow the the thick hotpot broth to flow down his head.

Everyone in the living room watched in shock. Auntie Zhang's chopsticks clattered to the floor.

"If I ever see you again, your hand will end up like this wall." Staring Uncle Wang straight in his ashen face, I put down the hotpot and then slashed my hand at the wall, which was covered with ridiculous fake art. A banging sound rang out as a thick chunk disappeared into dust.

All my relatives watched, stupefied. Mom's mouth hung open. Ignoring their questioning eyes, I dragged the perfectly calm and collected Master into the kitchen. We grabbed four plates of food and went upstairs to eat. We didn't shower.

I sat on the ground next to master and started eating. Other than the sound of Uncle Wang's wailing, downstairs was completely quiet.

"I'm sorry." My mouth was filled with food. I didn't dare look Master in the eyes.

"No need. You make your own decisions." Gobbling down his food, Master looked at me. He continued, "You have your own sense of justice. I have faith in my disciple."

"Thank you, Master," I said gratefully.

Master shook his head and stuffed some more Chinese Mustard Greens

[111] into his mouth. "I should thank you, kid, for inviting me to your house for Reunion dinner."

I looked at him, thinking about his lonely life.

Regardless of whether his deranged wuxia recollections were made up or not, he must have family somewhere in the world. Even if he was just an old veteran come to Taiwan from across the strait, he still should have friends to look after him, shouldn't he?

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[107] This is an important tradition, a dinner comparable to that on Christmas Eve or Thanksgiving perhaps <http://tinyurl.com/p3s39rj>

[108] I'm not sure who exactly these characters are. If anyone can find some information about them it would be great. In Chinese its 金狮王 and 银狮王.

[109] Red envelopes are the traditional way to give gift money, especially around New Year's time <http://tinyurl.com/6db5uw>

[110] The word used in Chinese literally means "dislocate." But only a joint can be dislocated, not a hand or wrist, so I'm changing the translation a bit. I'm not sure if the author is trying to impart the lack of knowledge of breaking versus dislocation, or whether the author himself is not sure, or whether it's one of those Mandarin v. English things.... In any case, until I talk to Giddens Ko personally to clarify, I'm going with the scientifically correct translation.

[111] This is apparently a Taiwan specialty dish that I couldn't find any existing English information about. It's called 长年菜. If anyone can find some info about it in English, that would be great.

Seafloor (4)

"Master, it's... it's 1987 A.D., do you have any family?" The chicken leg tasted really good.

Master nodded, but then shortly after, shook his head. "I'm not really sure."

"Not sure?" I asked. "You never got married?"

He shook his head. "No! I could never stop thinking about Hua Mao'er. How could I marry someone else? Although, there's a girl who calls herself my daughter. She moved herself in to my place in Yuanlin, so I really don't want to go back there. Ai, do not bring up this strange matter."

I thought it was a little funny, but a little bleak as well. An old man, a martial arts master, driven out of the house by his own daughter. With no home to return to, Master could only sleep in the trees on Ba Gua mountain, or occasionally, if it got too late, he would sleep alongside me in the "cave."

I thought back to the past few months, and all the Qi techniques and palm strikes Master had taught me. The later part of his life had been one of destitution and disappointment, lunacy and foolishness. All his hopes and attachments to justice, were now placed upon me and Ah Yi...

"Call Ah Yi and tell him to come over!" said Master.

"We're going to practice martial arts tonight?" I asked, grabbing the phone.

Master nodded, so I called Ah Yi, who was currently plundering red envelopes from his relatives. I told him to come over to practice.

Half an hour later, Ah Yi climbed up into the "cave," albeit looking a bit unwilling.

"Here you go." Master pulled two old-fashion red envelopes out from behind his back and gave them to us.

His face wrinkled with a smile, and he said, "You must continue to do your best in your martial arts practice!"

Ah Yi and I grabbed our red envelopes. From within my heart welled up strong emotions, and I wanted to cry.

"Master, you are truly filled with the spirit of loyalty," said Ah Yi with a smile. "Disciple will definitely study his boxing skills very hard, and eliminate the scum of the martial world!"

"Master," I said, "Even though you won't tell us the rest of the story, I know that Lan Jin is alive, right? Don't worry! One day Ah Yi and I will kill him!"

Master appeared to be quite moved. He hugged us and said, "Great! The day will eventually come to get rid of him!"

Inside each red envelope from Master was a green one-hundred yuan bill.

I always carried that red envelope in the pocket of my jacket. It accompanies me on a path that can never be retread, always warming my heart.

Three Hundred Years (1)

During the New Years Period, Ah Yi and I scampered about on the seafloor of Wang Gong. Yi Jing was always there at the shore, watching over pot after pot of ginger tea.

Walking about on the seafloor as training involves many aspects. Practicing standing on the seafloor helped develop outstanding balance. And it took natural control of inner force to be able to walk freely. On the seafloor, one must endure intense pressure and fear... of course, I did my best to avoid entering the ocean trench.

Sometimes, Master would instruct us to practice palm techniques on the seafloor. Everything became heavier and slower. By oh-so-slowly using Heaven Reaching Primary Destruction Hand to strike the reefs, we left our youthful mark on the seafloor.

On the sixth day of New Years [112], Yi Jing went back to school to attend tutoring classes. Ah Yi and I viewed school work as pretty much useless, so we continued our special kung fu training. That day, as soon as the sun appeared, we were on the seafloor picking up garbage, all the way until lunchtime. And then Master began teaching us Heaven Reaching Sword technique.

He gave each of us a straight tree branch, and the three of us began practicing sword techniques on the beach, the shadows of our sword dancing and flowing.

At first, Master just gave a simple description of the main points of attacking and defending with a sword. "Sword technique is definitely not

about sticking rigidly to certain sword forms and postures. So-called techniques are tangible; what is tangible has flaws. Therefore, only if a sword technique has no technique can it be considered top class. To have no technique requires incredible speed, and then the stances cannot be followed."

Hearing this, Ah Yi's face seemed to be covered with confusion. I had to admit, however, that this truth was contained in the wuxia novel *The Smiling Proud Wanderer*. When Feng Qingyang [113] taught the Dugu Nine Swords to Linghu Chong, he said something very similar.

So, Master did not teach us the profound details of Heaven Reaching Sword, but instead expended much effort instructing Ah Yi and I how to position our bodies, and how to make up for our poor posturing by making our bodies move incredibly fast.

"Master, shouldn't you teach us the details of sword stances first?" I asked. "Isn't it a bit too soon to ask us to defeat stances without using stances?" My own stances seemed to be in complete disarray, without any killing power whatsoever. I was thinking that perhaps he should teach us the basic stances of Heaven Reaching Sword. After all, before you can destroy the old and establish the new, you need something old that can be destroyed.

"I cannot remember." Master let out a sigh. "Three hundred years have passed," he said, "I have thoroughly forgotten the sword stances. I just remember, the meaning of the sword... ah, forget about it. Your Master's age is limited, I will just lead you directly to the advanced level."

Master wanted us to use sword techniques that stemmed from our hearts. Watching us from off to the side, he said, "If a sword technique

truly stems from you yourself, then it is a living sword technique. Even if you see the method with which your Master attacks, you cannot just lap up the information without digesting it. You must take the true meaning of the sword stances and assimilate them into your own sword theory. That is a top class sword technique."

Ah Yi didn't want to learn sword stances, so he was happy to dance about crazily on the beach with his sword. Master watched him and then shook his head. "This sword technique truly is a stance-less technique among stance-less techniques. Sadly, it would collapse in the first blow in a real fight."

Master looked at the tree branch in his hand and then sighed. "Lan Jin, that beast, said one thing that was true. A sword is used for killing, not for practicing martial arts. True sword technique, the type designed to kill, should only require one stance. Yuan Zai, Ah Yi, watch carefully."

The words barely out of his mouth, Master's body blurred into motion, and he flew past us. Suddenly, the tree branch in his hand slashed against several large rocks, flashing like lightning as he attacked.

He suddenly stopped, standing in front of us. We stared at him, somewhat in a daze. "Yuan Zai, Ah Yi. How many sword strikes did Master make?"

Ah Yi started counting how many large rocks there were. As for me, I just said, "Seventeen."

Surprised, Master said, "Correct, seventeen! Very good. But, now answer me this; how many rocks did Master kill?"

"Every one!" answered Ah Yi hurriedly.

I thought for a moment, then pointed at two rocks. "Those two, it seems. Right?"

Master nodded. "Correct," he said, with a note of praise. "You really do have natural talent." Master softly kicked the two that he had "killed." They immediately collapsed in half.

"Senior Disciple really does deserve his title," said Ah Yi with a forced smile.

I was pretty shocked myself. It turned out that I really could make out the details of Master's lightning-like moves. I felt extremely happy. Perhaps in the age that had seen the invention of atomic bombs, I really could be considered a genius of weaponry.

As evening fell, we headed back to Changhua on the virtually deserted city bus. Master demonstrated the particulars of how to move our bodies. The handful of passengers on the bus watched, baffled. Ah Yi and I watched Master twisting back and forth, imagining how our bodies would move according to our own understanding of the sword.

In this manner, Ah Yi and I spent the time from morning to noon traversing the seafloor, and the afternoon practicing sword techniques on the beach. No, we were creating sword techniques. Sometimes, I would hum some trendy pop tunes and dance around with my sword, trying to establish my own rhythm. Sometimes Ah Yi and I would follow the example of Master in the past, practicing our sword on the seafloor,

amidst the rushing tide. But usually the tree branches we used couldn't withstand the force, and would break. Master would say, "Fools! To imbue your weapon with inner force is not such an easy matter."

I understood. But even after several days, we found no success. We could only return to the shore and prance around with our swords.

Then at night, I would return to my cold home. Day after day, until school started again, Ah Yi and I practiced our kung fu. Because of the special training, we advanced by leaps and bounds. Ah Yi could withstand seven poisonous snakes, and I could take thirty-six. I could probably handle even more, but master said that it was difficult to catch so many types of snakes.

Also, having so many snakes coiled up in the "cave" started to produce a disgusting reek. Considering how much they had helped us in our martial arts training, we couldn't bring ourselves to eat them, so one by one we took them out into the wild and let them go.

Not long after school resumed, Dad returned.

The "cave" wasn't a "cave" any more. He hired some workers to lay two more walls. They also repaired the hole in the wall of the living room. Of course he would order this kind of work.

And of course, the living room once again was occupied, to become the rotten adults' smoke-filled playground. Their mindless, boisterous chatting constantly filled the air.

I didn't say much when I returned from school that day, nor did I take off my school uniform. Without even taking my backpack off, I used palm after palm to create a large hole in my room. It took 16 palms to "restore" my room to normal. But I didn't knock down the wall that Master had destroyed with one sword. After all, if the wind blew in from two directions, everything in my room would be a complete shambles.

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[112] For anyone not familiar with Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, it is an affair of many days. If you want to learn more about it:
<http://tinyurl.com/7vrdd>

[113] Feng Qingyang is of course a character in The Smiling Proud Wanderer: <http://tinyurl.com/mvt895a>

Three hundred years (2)

Dad was mad, of course, and called me down to the living room to reprimand me. Various uncles also offered kindly admonishments not to randomly destroy parts of the house. I could only listen coolly.

The old me would have done his best to put on a smiling face and pretend to appreciate the vile tender feelings of the rotten adults. But now, even giving those loser grown-ups a straight look was a waste of my time. I really couldn't understand how they were capable of this marathon of useless talk. Did they really not have anything better to do?

The uncles urged me to be a good boy, and then interrogated me about where I was studying kung fu. In 1987 Taiwan, Taekwondo schools were everywhere, so they started speculating that I was learning Taekwondo and had strayed down an evil path.

In any case, Dad wasn't really sure and didn't seem to want to actually know whether or not I was studying Taekwondo.

Uncle Wang's hand was wrapped up with a thick bandage of Chinese medicine and emitted a strong, musky smell. He sat next to Dad, shouting out a bunch of crap, describing my fiendishness on New Year's Eve. The more Dad heard the more mad he got. After all, I had lost him quite a bit of face.

I listened quietly, my mind filled with randomly changing sword forms. I kept thinking about them until suddenly something stabbed toward my face, and then my mind returned to the present.

When I regained awareness of my surroundings, I found that my fingers were clasping a feather duster. A feather duster that had been about to smack me in the face.

Uncle Wang's left hand held the other end of the duster.

He'd gone so far as to take my Dad's place to teach me a lesson?

"Is it convenient to use your left hand to eat?" I stared at Uncle Wang. That pig.

"How dare you!" shouted Uncle Wang furiously. "Let go immediately!"

"After this you can use your dick to eat." The fingers of my left hand held the feather duster. My right hand grabbed Uncle Wang's good left hand. I slowly twisted it.

I shouldered my backpack and went to the kitchen to grab two dishes of food. In the living room, Uncle Wang's loud wails once again filled the living room.

No one dared obstruct me. No one dared to call out to me. So I went upstairs, closed the door, and picked up a piccolo to practice sword techniques. I imagined that I was Huang Yaoshi, practicing Jade Flute Swordplay. [115]

In the following months, Master, Ah Yi and I spent our time in my small

room, our bodies twisting and leaping, our swords flourishing. Master would play the role of an enemy in order to inspire growth in our attack methods. As such, my sword technique began to emerge, one drop at a time.

Ah Yi would also engage in strange matches with master, the two of them competing like a dragon and a tiger. Even though his sword technique was bizarre and disorderly, after ten or so practice battles, he produced a usable set of strange and unique sword stances. In the most perilous of circumstances, they were even able to shock Master.

"The two of you have progressed quite a bit recently," praised Master. "Very good, very good. Yuan Zai, you have followed my path of developing a fast sword. Ah Yi, you have created your own bizarre sword technique. Both are excellent. Unarmed kung fu forms are just the same as sword forms, the key is to have no set forms. It is not enough to have a quick and clever in your use of forms. You must practice day and night, create your forms from your own heart, carve out your own techniques. In a few days we will begin to practice lightness arts. Mastering lightness arts will profoundly benefit your body, and your sword and unarmed techniques will quickly become top-rate."

"Master, when Lan Jin was slaughtering the martial world and you were in hiding and training your sword technique, didn't you create Twin Consummate Palm and Sword skill? And didn't you say that the Twin Consummate Palm and Sword could shock Heaven and Earth, and make gods and ghosts weep? Is it hard to learn?" I was currently dripping with sweat, gripping a table leg in place of a sword."

"Yeah!" said Ah Yi, who was also covered in sweat. "Even if you don't teach it to us, can't you do a demonstration? Open our eyes a bit?" He dropped his diabolo stick to the ground.

Looking a bit embarrassed, Master said, "I forgot that too. After three hundred years I've forgotten enough things to fill an ox-cart."

"You forgot about something that important?" I said, mouth gaping.

"Wah!" laughed Ah Yi. "Isn't Lan Jin still alive? What happens if you run into him? The most powerful weapon you ever created is gone, right?"

Master sat on my bed and said candidly, "There is no harm in forgetting. It is not possible to predict when the final battle with Lan Jin will be. Will it be planned, or a surprise? I am old, and even though Lan Jin is a few years younger than me, he cannot defeat the enemy that is age any more than me. Furthermore, the world is a huge place. Who knows, we may never meet, and might just die of old age."

"Even though the world is a huge place," I said, "Lan Jin is, after all, your archenemy. Why don't you go looking after him to get your revenge?"

Master pulled a black pot out of his bag. "Even though revenge is justice, I will never forget the lesson the Founder taught me. Lan Jin could be anywhere under the vast sky. My chances of encountering him are minute. Rather than spend vast amounts of time searching for him to get revenge, I should spend as much energy as possible promoting justice, which is my primary responsibility. Later, this responsibility will be placed on your shoulders. You must definitely surpass me, must definitely develop peerless martial ability, must definitely believe in yourselves. In this way, you can contend with the never-ending power of evil in the world."

Having said this, Master pulled out some food items from his bag.

“We’re going to have hotpot?” asked Ah Yi.

Master nodded. “I picked some wild herbs from the mountains, and killed a few little animals. Just use inner force to heat the broth in the pot and we can eat. This is another benefit of practicing kung fu.”

Then the three of us, Master and disciples, put the wild produce into the pot, added some water, then took turns using our inner force to heat it up. A fragrant aroma wafted up from the pot.

The broth, heated by inner force was incredibly delicious, and worthy of promoting nationwide.

No need for electricity, no need for pollution-causing charcoal. Furthermore, it could help you train your body, and can be eaten any time.

I’ll digress a moment to explain that from then on, the three of us would use inner force to make hotpot, rice gruel, boiled meat and vegetables. Sometimes master would heat up broth and add in some hand-picked mountain bamboo shoots and wild hare he’d caught with his own hands, to make a stir-fry dish. But Ah Yi and I wouldn’t eat it. Master’s hands were too dirty.

Master sipped some wild herb broth and said, “Later, when your lightness arts have developed enough, when you are capable of perform sneak attacks or fleeing quickly, Master will lead you into acts of true

chivalry, and let you experience the true martial world.”

Ah Yi nodded. “But who exactly will we be sneak attacking or assassinating? What if we get caught by the police? Don’t tell me you’ll just say we’re performing acts of chivalry?” Ah Yi pulled a carrot out of the hotpot.

“You will understand when the time comes,” said Master. “I will teach you martial arts at night, and during the day you will attend your school. I will scout around to look for evildoers. Ai, every society has villains. With some, teaching them a lesson with fists is enough. Others, must be outright slain.”

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[114] No, it’s not Piccolo from DragonBall but rather a type of flute:
<http://tinyurl.com/ahfrep>

[115] Huang Yaoshi is one of the Five Great martial artists during the Song Dynasty in Jin Yong fiction. This link has information about him as well as the Jade Flute Swordplay <http://tinyurl.com/3wkrelu>

Three Hundred Years (3)

I gripped the hotpot in my hands and circulated my inner force.
“Master, society nowadays isn’t like that. Sure there are good police and bad police, but the good police are in the majority. Why not just catch the bad guys and give them to the police to handle?”

“Yeah,” said Ah Yi. “On TV, the bad guy might kill the good guy’s friend, but after the good guy catches him, even though he wants to shoot him dead, he’ll grimly say something about handing him over to the law to face trial, or maybe something like, ‘scum like you isn’t worth dirtying my hands over.’ And then he hands over the bad guy to the police.”

“Movies always end with the good guy pointing a gun at the bad guy’s head,” I chimed in. “The bad guy begs for mercy, and then a bunch of good guys surround them, and they scream at the good guy not to do anything rash, that the law will provide a just solution. Or sometimes they just yell at him to not shoot, and say something like, ‘If you shoot him, won’t that mean you’re just like him?’ And then the good guy has no choice to put the gun down, even though a bunch of his friends have already been killed. He curses the bad guy, and then leaves him for the police to handle.”

Ah Yi continued, “But the bad guy is usually stupid, and as soon as the good guy walks off, he tries to sneak attack him, and then the good guy has no choice but to kill him and end things.”

“I have never seen that kind of thing,” said Master, “but, I will not interfere with your idea of justice. The day will come when you will become great heroes, and you will face difficult situations. Situations in

which you will face great pressure to make a move. In any case, as long as you follow your own conscience, Master will trust you.”

At that time, Ah Yi and I didn’t completely understand. But in my mind, Master’s words really did seem to correspond to the situations found in wuxia novels.

In Jin Yong wuxia novels, you don’t often see the police, or constables as they were called.

In Gu Long novels, you see constables a lot, but they are either useless imbeciles, or evil. The people who actually investigate the bizarre cases and arrest the killers are people like Lu Xiaofeng and Chu Liuxiang, who don’t have any status at all in the yamen. [116]

Also, in the world of wuxia novels, you never see the hero kill the bad guy and then go to the yamen to report the case. And when Jianghu ruffians brazenly kill a bunch of people in the middle of the street, you rarely see the constables diligently showing up to handle the situation. Well, if they do, they usually just end up as cannon fodder.

Pretty much the only people who maintain peace in Jianghu are the heroes who take action according to their own beliefs.

If a hero had to check the law books before attacking, or drag the bad guy’s dead body in and report to the authorities after the fight, he would definitely be a sucky hero, not free-spirited at all.

Also, the heroes in the novels always say: “This time I’ll break your legs,

you dog. If I hear about you doing evil ever again, I'll destroy all the kung fu in your body!" Or something like that. Conflicts in Jianghu are not resolved by the yamen, but by the judgement of the hero, or perhaps a group of heroes.

And yet, on the other hand, conflicts in Jianghu are also sometimes decided by the will of the ruffians and bandits, who use all their power, backed by their wicked philosophies, to commit countless atrocities.

I guess that since the yamens are so powerless, the heroes really have no choice but to improve their skills, otherwise the powerful bad guys in Jianghu would decimate the common people, and that wouldn't be good at all.

But, what would Master do to punish the bad guys?

The Black Star Pistols [117] carried by bad guys nowadays are very powerful. We can't catch bullets with our bare hands. Although, Master's invisible sword aura was actually explosively powerful. He could knock down a bad guy at a distance with a table leg. By the time the bad guy drew his weapon, he would be chopped into two pieces... But, was Master really going to teach us to kill people to carry out justice?

Maybe we would be good-for-nothing heroes. We could destroy their Black Star Pistols, give them a good beating, and then hand them over to the police. Being good-for-nothing wouldn't be that bad. Killing people would just be too horrific. And it would be just as horrific to have to deal with the corpses.

I didn't want to contemplate the matter any more.

"What are you thinking about?" Master said. "The broth is boiling!" He pulled a snail out with his chopsticks.

I grabbed a bowl full of wild mountain vegetables and tossed them in. "Master, how did your big battle end?"

"Also," said Ah Yi, his face covered by the steam rising from the bowl, "how did you end up living three hundred years? Do you have some secret technique to achieve the lifespan of a turtle? Can you teach us?"

Master lowered the bowl in his hands, seeming to hesitate over something.

Time slowly returned to the dark, suffocating cave.

My palm was stabbed through by Lan Jin's invisible sword aura, but I was still able to land a palm strike onto his head. Unfortunately, my Qi energy was waning, and all I accomplished was knocking him backwards. There was no time to lose. I lifted my sword up and stabbed forward crazily. But all I stabbed was the empty, silent air.

As I think back, I realize that I was too flustered. Because of a slight victory, I grew too anxious to go on the offensive. Vicious Lan Jin managed to conceal himself within the gusts of wind generated by the sword. He disappeared like a ghost.

Yet again, I held my breath. I clamped my left hand onto my thigh so that the blood would flow down my leg, and not create drops that Lan Jin

could hear and use to locate me.

I was opposing a darkness within the darkness, and yet my heart felt no fear. I only concentrated on locating the injured demon.

Lan Jin had suffered internal injuries from my incredibly vicious palm just now, and had been stabbed by my sword somewhere between his shoulder and neck. I'd also landed a palm strike on the top of his skull. But even though I seemed to have the upper hand, I needed to keep my cool, to ensure safety for the common people.

It seemed as if Lan Jin had fused himself with the darkness. Not a single sound could be heard.

"Don't tell me he's dead?" I couldn't help but ask myself. The sword in my hand didn't seem to agree.

Suddenly, I felt a coldness on my throat, which then turned into pain. I instantly stabbed my sword forward, but it stabbed into nothing. Suddenly a clash of metal could be heard, and I flew backwards.

So it turned out Lan Jin had been holding his breath and slowly searching out in the darkness with his sword, calmly seeking me. As soon as his sword had touched my throat, he tried to stab it through. But when I counterattacked, he suddenly dropped his sword and shifted positions, then launched a mighty palm strike toward my chest.

I slammed into the ground, and my sword went flying. Before I could get up, I was struck by another palm in the shoulder. Lan Jin had heard

me fall and determined my position. Without taking time to retrieve his sword, he'd attacked me with a palm strike. Tricky bastard. Very good. I was worried that he would hide himself again then somehow figure out another ruse to end my life. I didn't want to try to deal with every trick he could pull out. Instead, I would meet him palm to palm with all my strength against his!

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[116] The yamen is where the local government operates out of
<http://tinyurl.com/pp5jd6l>

[117] This is a handgun of Chinese manufacture
<http://tinyurl.com/otl6sgm>

Three Hundred Years (4)

Blood spewed from my throat, and my chest had sustained severe internal injuries. But the power in my palms surged. They carried with them a fierce wailing sound, a sound that surely came from the countless lives taken in the martial world. They issued out a sad and shrill cry.

Even though Lan Jin's inner force was no match for mine, he was able to rely on the darkness to evade most of the power of my palms. Occasionally he would strike my body with his sword Qi. And so it was that in that dark crypt, the two of us relied on our viciousness to fight the most dangerous and intense final battle ever fought in the martial world.

Lan Jin was a genius of the type never before seen, his stances and techniques were the best under heaven. But as I said before, the benevolent is invincible in the end. With no regard to my life, I used the Twin Consummate Palm and Sword technique. The soaring palm power could not be defeated by Lan Jin's sword Qi. My heart was filled with the desire to champion benevolence, to execute the demon. Finally, I was able to catch him. Our palms connected, and we began to compete with inner force.

You probably understand, pure inner force is the most dangerous of all, because there is no evading or hiding. Even if I was gained victory, I knew would have consumed vast amounts of energy. Coupled with my injuries, it was hard to say whether or not I would just die a few seconds after Lan Jin.

And so our roiling inner forces collided and struggled. My inner force was as fierce as the raging tide, and Lan Jin's crashed down like a

landslide, surging forward.

The raging tide and a landslide, we very nearly rent our Qi reservoirs into pieces.

But, time ticked by. Slowly but surely, my inner force began to weaken, and my mind began to grow murky. Lan Jin's inner force was also dissipating. Yet weak as it was, he still continued to attack me, as if unable to stop. I gritted my, searching for the slightest shreds or vestiges of Qi within my acupuncture points and using it to defend against Lan Jin, who I knew was on the brink of death.

I really could not understand how Lan Jin, who's inner force was so much weaker than mine, could continue to fight against me so long. He truly was a fearsome opponent. My energy and my Qi were slowly dissipating, every single drop was being used up.

Just when it seemed as if I had not left even one strand of Qi, I felt that Lan Jin's offense had become like gossamer threads. And at that moment I heard a soft gentle voice singing next to my ear. The lyrics of the song I knew quite well, and they moved me. It was Hua Mao'er come to take me away.

And then, I laughed.

And this laugh carried me through 300 years.

"Huh?" I said, puzzled.

"It was in this way, fallen down but our palms stuck together, that Lan Jin and I spent the next three hundred years. Afterwards, I shook my body clean of the yellow soil, and left that dreary cave, my mind still foggy." Master's voice trembled, as if he himself didn't believe the story.

"And you just walked out? As if you had just woken up from sleeping?" Ah Yi had been listening raptfully, the broth in the bowl long since grown cold.

Master furrowed his brow. "A deep slumber of three hundred years certainly seems endless, but waking up is waking up, just as if from a huge dream."

I was baffled. Just as I was about to speak, Master continued, "If you calculate it, the year I awoke was 1974 A.D. Of course, I did not realize that astonishing fact until I had gone through many things, experienced a lot of events. As for when I awoke, I had no idea. In the end, that was not the most important question."

Of course it wasn't the most important question. "Yeah," I said. "The most important thing was how you could lay in a cave for three hundred years and not die."

Master shook his head. "No, that is not the most important point. The important thing was that upon awaking, Lan Jin was nowhere to be seen."

For a second, my heart stopped beating and I couldn't breathe.

"Lan Jin was gone," said Master in a low voice, "but he had left behind

two characters.”

Ah Yi and I held our breaths.

“Wait for me.” [118]

Master’s eyes were opened wide, as if he were back in the yellow dust, staring at the two characters.

In those three hundred years, our inner force had not been completely depleted. It had something to do with the deep theories of Heaven Reaching Sect’s martial arts. In the course of our faceoff, Lan Jin and I had forced out each other’s latent potential. The fierce struggle of the two Qi forces within our bodies had transformed into a type of Qi circulation. The two pure streams of inner force never left our bodies. It was as if we had become chrysalises, struggling at death’s door.

Furthermore, the noxious subterranean fumes had forced us to hold our breath, down to the point that our basic life functions virtually ceased. We struggled together in the noxious air, which had not seen a ray of sunlight in a thousand years. That cave abounded with all sorts of fortuitous practical jokes, the poisonous air turning us into living zombies, dead, but not dead, for three hundred years.

Finally, one day, a group of villagers were digging a well, and dug right into the cave. The poisoned air slowly dissipated, like a magical seal on an ancient incantation slowly peeling away, and I gradually regained consciousness.

Upon awaking, my body was quite stiff, and my head murky. A few rays of sunlight pierced down into the cave, forcing my eyes open. At that time, I didn't know how long I had been asleep. Two hours? Half a day? A day? Or a month? The only thing I could be certain about was that Lan Jin was gone.

I mustered my strength and began to pull myself to my feet. After I saw Lan Jin's message, I wondered why he hadn't killed me as I lay there. I fell, and continued to ponder the question. And then I caught sight of You Tanzhi's pale, mummified corpse, the ice-cold iron chain, and the even colder Li Xunhuan. I was not surprised in the least by that. But when I caught sight of the endless forest of stone statues, I was shocked to the core.

What was this?

It turned out, the place where Lan Jin had engaged in our fight to the death was none other than the ancient and enigmatic mausoleum of Qin Shihuang! [119]

Of course, at the time, I had no idea that the stone statues of the warriors were funerary objects in Emperor Qin's subterranean tomb. At the moment, I had no time to sit around wondering about it. I stood there loosening my body, trying to shake off three hundred years of lack of movement. I picked up my beautiful sword, whose luster had long since faded. Gritting my teeth, I climbed up out of the cave.

It wasn't easy, but I got out, and saw a group of strange people running away from me. "Another monster!" they cried out.

At that point I was certain that Lan Jin really had escaped ahead of me.

He truly was a troublesome devil.

Later on, I wandered around aimlessly around Xi'an. Everywhere I went, people pointed at me and my strange clothes. If I tried to talk to anyone, they would instantly say I was a lunatic. I got beaten up a few times for no apparent reason. My martial arts had not recovered, so they were true beatings. Each time, I ended up on the ground, wondering if I really was a lunatic. After all, anyone who told a story of sleeping through 300 years would be called a lunatic, no matter where they were.

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[118] In Chinese it is only two characters, in English three words.

[119] This is of course the famous Terracotta army
<http://tinyurl.com/2vza8l>

Three Hundred Years (5)

There were three things that kept my belief alive.

First, the mission entrusted to me by the sect. Justice requires high level kung fu, and the spirit of nobility must be passed down to further generations.

Second, my heart could never be at peace. My vengeance against Lan Jin could not dissipate even after three hundred years.

Third, Hua Mao'er's singing, which had accompanied me through three hundred years of slumber. The lyrics of her song did not take me to another world, but encouraged me to become the hero which she knew existed in her heart.

"Then what?" asked Ah Yi.

"Then, the precious sword given to me by master was confiscated by a gang of thugs who called themselves police. Afterwards they beat me senseless." With a tone of loneliness, Master continued, "I found a remote and quite place and began practicing Heaven Reaching inner arts. After about half a year, my martial arts were completely recovered, and I began my search for disciples. In that way I could not only pass on all of my kung fu, but in the process gain an understanding of what had happened in the world in the last three hundred years."

Master put his chopsticks down and continued, "But, as I traveled throughout China in the following five years, I unexpectedly was unable

to find a single person capable of sensing an aura of death. So I robbed a gang, the kind you call a snakehead gang[120]. I used their boat to come here to Taiwan. Afterwards, I would occasionally row it to the Land of the Rising Sun, or another place called the Philippines, to search for disciples. If the boat capsized, I would walk along the ocean floor. Ai, those years were spent running around everywhere."

I was somewhat moved emotionally, and also a little scared. "What about Lan Jin. Why did he want you to wait for him? Did he ever find you?"

Master nodded. "One of the main reasons I didn't go after him to seek revenge, other than my urgent desire to find disciples to become seeds of justice, was the two characters he'd left written for me. If Lan Jin didn't kill anyone, I wouldn't be able to find him. I must accept what the Founder had told me. If Lan Jin ended his murderous ways, then there was no need to seek him out for revenge. If he had wanted to kill me, then he could have picked up the sword as soon as he awakened and ended my life quietly. Therefore, the fact that he left behind the two characters meant that he was supremely confident he could find me after I recovered, and cut me down. Even if he did find me, very well. My focus would be on my search for disciples. I would raise them to be the final generation of martial arts masters and heroes."

After hearing Master's explanation of everything that had happened three hundred years ago, I finally believed all his strange stories.

Master's martial arts were completely real, and fearsomely powerful. In the twentieth century, it was something truly miraculous, but as for three hundred years ago in Ming Dynasty China, when great heroes roamed the land, a world of dancing swords, this type of miraculous martial arts power was completely believable!

With martial arts so incomparably powerful, and the strange conditions in the cave, it would be completely plausible to survive for three hundred years!

But, there was something that I thought quite strange.

"Master, there's something off," I said suddenly. "When you fell down in the cave, you were twenty three or twenty four. When you woke up in 1974, even though you were actually 324 years old, you really were actually still only 24. Right now it's 1987, which means you're only 37! How come you look so old?"

"Maybe," said Master with a bit of regret, "it's just a cruel trick played by Time. By some miracle, Time allowed me to sleep for three hundred years, but then three hundred years later, It would return to rob me of my youth. Every year I age faster and faster. I feel the pressure of time, and therefore, I used those fierce and distasteful methods to get you to become my disciples."

Ah Yi took hold of the cold hotpot, then began circulating his inner force to heat it up. "It's called side-effects."

I suddenly realized that the same effects of time travel would affect Lan Jin, and thought to myself: No wonder Master doesn't go after Lan Jin, it really would be a waste of precious time. Even though Lan Jin is two years younger, the advanced aging effect will definitely have turned him into a white-haired old man. They might even die before they have a chance to fight.

Master thought revenge was a trifling matter, and that martial arts and justice were paramount. So after his desperate search turned up me, he turned the snakes loose on Ah Yi and I, forced us to walk around on the ocean floor. He used all these dangerous martial arts training techniques so that Ah Yi and I would be able to complete our training before he died of old age.

As for the Devil King Lan Jin, by the time he came to Taiwan, the three of us would be able to take care of him.

And so, three hundred years of mystery was resolved over that night's hotpot meal. The pot boiled, then grew cold. After growing cold, it boiled again.

As for Ah Yi and I, our blood boiled too, hot with the desire to practice martial arts.

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[120] A snakehead is a person who arranges to illegally smuggle people out of China. If you're interested in the history of these gangs and how they work, I highly recommend the book Snakehead by Patrick Radden Keefe . Info about snakehead gangs: <http://tinyurl.com/4lowjog>. Link to the book: <http://tinyurl.com/mllyma9>

Paper airplane (1)

"Let's have dinner tonight at Ding Gua Gua [121], okay?" said Yi Jing with a smile, her hand clasping in mine.

"Tonight won't work, Master's gonna teach us lightness arts!" I pulled Yi Jing along as we walked together beneath the Giant Buddha of Ba Gua Mountain.

After school let out, Ba Gua Mountain was filled with students in their school uniforms, especially the scenic areas around the Giant Buddha... most were from Changhua Middle school and Changhua High School, which were located on the mountain itself.

"Really? Aren't you going through your checklist a bit too quickly?" Yi Jing was always very perceptive.

"It's a little soon, but Master has his reasons. Besides, I'm basically a martial arts genius, so there's no harm in learning lightness arts a bit early." As I spoke, I noticed that standing beneath the Giant Buddha, next to a cart selling roast squid, was a foreigner. [122]

A young, blonde-haired foreigner.

"Can I go watch you guys practice lightness arts?" she said. "I can talk with my tutor, I'll just arrange some makeup lessons later."

I nodded happily and said, "Great! Master will be glad. He always says

that you are my Hua Mao'er." [123]

"I'm your cat?" said Yi Jing, sounding puzzled.

I hadn't told her Master's tragic tale, because he had instructed us not to reveal to anyone outside the sect the horrific history of Jianghu. For one thing, the story was just too strange, no one would believe it. Furthermore, matters of the sect should be handled by the sect.

I sat there chatting with Yi Jing across from the Giant Buddha, staring curiously at the blonde foreigner.

He stood there smiling, holding a freshly purchased roast squid and sizing up the passing students.

"How old is he?" said Yi Jing. "It's so hard to figure out the age of foreigners. Although, he is really handsome."

I was a little bit jealous. So I opened my tattered backpack, ripped a page out of my math book and folded it into a paper airplane. "I'll show him a thing or two," I said, pulling Yi Jing along until we were behind him.

She knew I was jealous. With a laugh, she said, "Stop it, what happens if somebody get killed?"

I snorted. "It's just a paper airplane." With that, I infused the paper airplane with just a little bit of inner force and then said, "Look at my personally invented secret weapon."

I tossed the paper airplane gently toward the foreigner's neck. I wanted to scare him a bit. Because it was imbued with some inner force, it would definitely leave a mark on his neck.

The foreigner munched with gusto on the roast squid. There was no way he had even the slightest clue about my paper airplane sneak attack.

But—

He didn't look back at all, just slowly lowered his head. The paper airplane flew straight over.

I couldn't help but think that the foreigner really was a lucky bastard. He turned and smiled, his teeth glittering in the sunlight.

He really was a handsome guy, at least ten times more handsome than MacGuyver. [123]

Hefting his half-eaten squid, the handsome foreigner laughed at me in greeting. I could only respond with my own hollow laugh.

And it was like that, beneath the Giant Buddha.

A paper airplane opened up a hard-to-imagine world.

The paper airplane ran into a stone lion and then fell to the ground.

"Hello." Very standard Chinese.

The young foreigner's smile was made even more brilliant by the golden setting sun.

Yi Jing elbowed me, and I had no choice but to look at the young foreigner and say, somewhat embarrassedly, "Hello."

He looked at us curiously, and then quite amicably said, "Are you two sweethearts?"

Yi Jing shook her hands in denial. When I saw how fluent the young foreigner's Chinese was, I couldn't help but blurt out, "Your Chinese is so good!"

"Thank you," he said with elegant poise. "I like Asian culture very much." With a smile, he walked toward us, carrying with him the last bit of his squid.

It was a really embarrassing moment. I didn't usually get along very well with strangers.

Yi Jing knew my personality, so she grabbed me and said, "We have a makeup lesson to go to. See you! Hope you have a nice time in Taiwan!"

The blonde foreigner nodded. With a smile, he said, "Taiwanese students really are busy."

"See you later," I said politely, pulling Yi Jing along down the stone steps leading away from the Giant Buddha.

He chomped down on the squid and with a grin and said, "You will."

You will.

The foreigner's method of saying farewell was really weird. [124]

Well, he was a foreigner after all.

"How are you going to practice lightness arts?" asked Yi Jing curiously. In her hand she held a toy airplane made from foam board.

"I'm not sure. I'm sure Master will exceed all expectations as usual." Jokingly, I said, "Any method is fine, as long as he doesn't push me and Ah Yi off a skyscraper. That would be pushing things a bit too quickly."

Yi Jing laughed. "Who knows, you might have to tie a barrel of water to your back and leapfrog up a staircase."

I shook my head. "Ah Yi and I have practiced walking around on the seafloor. We've already developed leg strength and endurance that you wouldn't believe. Even if we had to carry bricks on our backs, it wouldn't be a big deal. Whatever Master has in mind, it's definitely going to be scary. Think about it, to develop our inner force and palm strength, he had poisonous snakes bite us. Right?"

Yi Jing looked down the abandoned alley. In a quiet voice she said, "Nobody's watching. Let me see how strong your legs are. Please?"

I looked around, and there was nobody around, so I found a piece of brick lying beneath a telephone pole. I stepped on it lightly with my foot and crushed it into dust.

Yi Jing stared blankly. "Actually," I said, "bricks aren't really very tough. I don't even need to circulate my inner force to smash it. A giant rock would be too tough. I couldn't handle that."

Yi Jing's face was filled with doubt. "Don't you think it's weird?"

Now I was confused. "What's weird?"

Yi Jing looked at me earnestly. "How come your martial arts are so powerful?"

"How come?" I said dumbly. "What a weird question. I've been training hard for the past several months. How could I not be getting powerful?"

Yi Jing didn't seem convinced. "I know you've been training really hard, but in just a couple months, you can break a wall with your hand, you can walk around on the seafloor, you can use inner force to expel poison from your blood. Don't you think your progress is just a bit too quick?"

[121] I couldn't find much information, but it seems that Ding Gua gua is a fried chicken chain restaurant in Taiwan.

[122] As a foreigner in China I take notice of what people call me, since there are many ways to refer to foreigners in Chinese. In this case he calls him 外国人 as opposed to 老外 or other less respectful terms.

[123] Since MacGuyver was on TV when I was a kid, it seems so common to me, but perhaps some of you have never heard of it. One of my favorite shows when I was young. <http://tinyurl.com/83ega>

[124] Right here he switches to 老外, as well as in the next instance in the next sentence.

Paper airplane (2)

Correct.

It really was a bit strange.

I had seen a performance on television before, on a program called “Slugger Attack,” [125] in which they invited a wrinkly old martial arts Qigong master onto the show. The host had called him a national treasure and a true martial artist. He used inner force to increase the temperature of some water in a pot by two, maybe three degrees. He’d also done a kung fu demonstration where he used his hands to smash some bricks.

But—

Within a few minutes, I could use my inner force to bring a pot of water to the boil.

I’d never tried to smash bricks with my hands, but I had the strength to knock down a wall with my palms, that was way above the level of smashing some sissy bricks.

But—

I had only practiced kung fu for a few months.

The same with Ah Yi. Even though he sucked.

"It's because I'm a martial arts genius."

I said it, and looked Yi Jing in her large eyes.

That's right, I was a genius who could naturally sense auras of death. One in ten million.

Yi Jing looked at me earnestly. "So are you going to become a hero?"

I nodded. "I will. Maybe it's just my destiny to be a hero, and that's why I was born with these abilities."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I suddenly thought of Master's mortal enemy, the super genius who had laid waste to the martial world—Lan Jin.

Born with unparalleled natural talent for martial arts, yet completely lacking a chivalrous and benevolent spirit. A real bastard.

Because of this bastard, the martial arts legacy of Jianghu had been destroyed, and a precious consummate national tradition could not be handed down from generation to generation. The Eight-Nation Alliance bullied us, forced us to sign an unequal treaty [126], and it was all because the Chinese People had no super-powered martial artists. No wonder we couldn't stand up to the boats and cannons of the foreigners. And the so-called national treasure martial arts masters could only go onto television to heat some water up and break a few bricks.

The true conservator of unparalleled divine skills could only lay asleep in fake death before finally climbing out the yellow earth to see the light of days three hundred years later.

As Master had repeatedly emphasized, martial arts practitioners must have valiant hearts, and should only attack when necessary. As far as putting on performances and that kind of thing, Master had never even considered such a thing.

As for me, I completely agreed with Master's way of thinking. Yet, having such amazing martial arts and only being able to float along with the ignorant masses, in the end, it was such a lonely existence.

True heroes are always lonely.

Yi Jing suddenly gripped my hand tightly.

"It's really wonderful to have a hero at your side." Her hand clasped mine tightly.

"Thanks." I felt a feeling much more turbulent than inner force, surging forth from Yi Jing's small hand.

"What are you thanking me for?" A strange expression covered her face.

"I don't know." My expression must have been very strange as well.

For me, a middle-school student, to be Yi Jing's exclusive hero truly

made me happy.

“Hey! See if you can catch this!” Yi Jing laughed. A toy cardboard airplane appeared in her hand and she launched it into the air.

The airplane slid into the sky. I released Yi Jing’s hand and was about to pursue it, when suddenly I couldn’t move.

An aura of death!

“What’s wrong?” Yi Jing could see that my face had turned white, and my palms were sweating.

“Don’t speak.” My heart was about to stop beating.

It was the first time ... I ever felt such a sinister aura of death.

This was completely different from Master’s roiling tide; this aura surged with ruthlessness.

I gritted my teeth. Sweat covered my whole body.

The nature of an aura of death always corresponds to the personality of its owner.

And its size will always relate to the kung fu level of its owner.

This aura of death was emanating from ... five hundred meters ahead!
And it was moving straight toward my house!

"Ouch!" I had squeezed Yi Jing's hand so hard that it was hurting her.

I released her and then hurriedly said, "Yi Jing, get out of here. Don't follow me! There's a bad guy nearby!"

Looking frightened to death, she replied, "I'll call the police for you!"

"Sending police here would just be sending them to their graves. Get home, quickly!" I raced toward my house.

This aura of death definitely was not Master's.

And I definitely was no match for whoever it belonged to.

But if this person wanted to wreak havoc at my house; I would have to do what I could, even if it wasn't enough.

My hand gripped the flute I had used in music class today. There was no time to think about strategy.

Wait! Another aura of death!

Another aura of death, so powerful it seemed it could topple the mountains and drain the seas! It, too, raced toward my house.

It was pure, intense, fierce.

It was Master!

In the distance, I caught sight of him as he leaped from the top of a telephone pole, straight into the hole in my bedroom wall.

I couldn't be...

My shock seemed to have no limits, and suddenly I couldn't move forward.

In the time span of a single heartbeat, two auras of death, two violent storms, both disappeared.

I couldn't take even a single step forward, because emanating faintly from the hole in my wall was pure killing intent.

In a showdown between two world-class masters, auras of death are not needed.

Auras of death are merely used as a way of greeting, a call to death.

I stood there, about ten meters away from my house, looking up at the hole.

I could see Master's green Tang suit moving about.

And then it was gone.

I mustered my courage, took a deep breath, and charged into the hole. Master stood there, my quilt slung over his shoulder. He said nothing.

What about the owner of that sinister aura of death?

Master looked at me, and then pointed at my quilt.

I nearly fainted.

Master, my bulging quilt slung over his shoulder, leaped out of the hole and then "flew" from telephone pole to telephone pole toward Bagua Mountain.

An aroma wafted out from the ragged hole into the night, an aroma that is uniquely present during winter.

Along with the flavor of perplexity.

Ah Yi held the hotpot in his hands, and the broth slowly heated up.

"Was it Lan Jin?" I asked.

"I don't know." Confusion filled Master's face. "That old man's martial

arts were very advanced," he said. "We exchanged three stances very quickly. His three stances were incredibly ruthless, and his inner force was incredibly powerful, but..."

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[125] I found numerous references to this game show in various articles, but no articles about the show itself.

[126] He's referring to when several the foreign countries sacked Beijing and forced China to sign the Boxer Protocol. The Eight Nation Alliance

<http://tinyurl.com/2u4k8c>. The Boxer Protocol

<http://tinyurl.com/lmbmhn6>

Paper Airplane (3)

"But what?" asked Ah Yi.

Master scratched his head. "Lan Jin's martial arts are very advanced, extremely advanced. It is impossible that he would only inflict such light injuries. But right before the killer attacked, he said something to me. 'I've come for you.' It seems as if it really was Lan Jin. Perhaps his martial arts regressed?"

Master untied the frog buttons of his Tang suit, revealing a wound on his shoulder.

"Even stranger, Lan Jin has two shining blue eyes. But this killer had no eyes." Master furrowed his brow.

"No eyes?" I asked.

"The killer's eye sockets were completely empty, there were no eyes whatsoever."

"How creepy!" I said. "Don't tell me he figured out your position by listening to the changes in the wind?"

Ah Yi chimed in: "Maybe Lan Jin's eyes got dug out by someone! A person like him doesn't deserve any compassion!"

"Everything that happened occurred three hundred years ago. My

memories of Lan Jin's appearance hav already grown fuzzy. When you add in the rapid aging, it makes it really hard for me to decide who the man last night was. The only things I remember about Lan Jin are his two unsettling blue eyes. I remember them very clearly. Perhaps the killer really was Lan Jin, perhaps not."

The hotpot in Ah Yi's hand slowly started to boil again. "Other than Lan Jin and us," he said, "are there any other true martial arts masters in the world?"

Master looked as perplexed as usual. "Perhaps the killer was sent by Lan Jin to assassinate me. But you're right. It seems unimaginable that there are high level masters in the world other than Lan Jin who would teach people such fearsome arts."

I thought about it for a moment. "Maybe that old guy really was Lan Jin."

"Master, you finally got your revenge!" said Ah Yield. "We should celebrate!"

"I am afraid," said Master, "my heart feels not an iota of the pleasure of having taken revenge."

Not an iota.

A life and death battle that had stretched out over 300 years, had been decided in one flash of a moment.

But the hatred that had fueled the revenge could not dissipate in the twinkling of an eye.

Perhaps master had entered some paradoxical void, depressed and unable to accept the reality of vengeance.

Master and disciples, the three of us, casually ate our hotpot. I munched on a wild mushroom and thought to myself: Had Master buried the killer's corpse somewhere on Bagua Mountain?

It wasn't a happy feeling knowing that someone had died in your room.

I looked at the quilt on my bed. A quilt that had wrapped up a dead person.

Ai...

Tonight I would just use inner force to keep myself warm.

"The foot shall not touch the ground."

Ah Yi and I had our backpacks on, and Yi Jing stood next to us.

We had just finished eating some Changhua Ba-wan [128] that was so delicious it made you want to cry. We walked out of the shop, and it was then that Master said he wanted to teach us lightness arts.

Ah Yi scratched his head and then threw his backpack down. "The foot shall not touch the ground?"

Master nodded. "One of the primary training methods of lightness arts is that the foot shall not touch the ground."

Confused, Yi Jing said, "Why can your foot not touch the ground?"

Master replied, "One top of the head of the Giant Buddha, I put two big rocks with the characters 'You Succeed' written on them. They have to bring those rocks back to me. I will wait in Yuan Zai's bedroom for them. Yi Jing, you return home. It will take much effort for them to return and meet me."

I thought to myself: "The Giant Buddha is really tall. Master will definitely be hiding behind us. If we fall, he'll catch us."

Ah Yi must have been thinking the same thing. He slapped my shoulder and said, "Let's make it a contest and see who can get back to Master first!" With that, he started to race off down the street. Except Master grabbed him.

"The foot shall not touch the ground," he said with a smile, "means that you are not permitted to place your feet on the ground."

Ah Yi and I were stupefied. Master continued, "You are only allowed to move forward by placing your feet on the telephone poles and store signs. If the telephone poles and store signs are too far apart, then you may step on the rooftops or balconies. Once you reach Ba Gua mountain,

you may step on the trees. In any case, this is the shortcut to learning how to fly across the rooftops." [128]

I didn't quite understand. "Why?" I asked.

Ah Yi was getting angry. "Master, there's a lot of people around. Are you trying to get us to look stupid on purpose?"

At this point, even Yi Jing looked a bit skeptical.

"Master," I said, "didn't you say that we aren't allowed to let people see our martial arts? You want us to go jumping around right in the middle of the city, isn't that a bit contradictory?"

Master nodded. "You do have a point."

In unison, Ah Yi and I both said, "Let's wait until night!"

Master shook his head. "Since you are not allowed to show off your martial arts, you just need to run a bit faster, and do not let anyone see you."

"What?!" I said, shocked.

"Quickly!" he yelled. "The master's orders shall not be disobeyed!"

Ah Yi and I looked at each other, unable to wrap our minds about what

Master was thinking.

Master grabbed us and forcefully tossed us up onto the telephone poles. We hastily steadied our legs, each of us standing on a telephone pole, one leg on the pole, one leg lifted into the air. Passersby stared at us curiously.

From down below, Master called up, "There are many people down here, begin running!"

Of course we had to run! It was so embarrassing!

As far as Ah Yi and I were concerned, the next telephone pole was way too far away. The only thing we could jump to next were streetlights. Unfortunately, I jumped a bit too far and fell down onto a car parked on the street. Ah Yi's jump was too light. He tried to grab back onto the telephone pole, but then tumbled down.

Looking up from below, I shouted, "Rip off your school logo! Quickly!"

I ripped the school logo off of my pocket and jumped upwards as hard as I could. I flipped onto the telephone pole and jumped toward the next shop sign.

It was in this haphazard manner that Ah Yi and I jumped from telephone pole to light pole to shop sign through the city center. We were like the Mario brothers.

That's right, I was really confused.

Why did I have to follow Master's instructions, hopping around the city, my face burning red?

**

[127] Ba-wan is a kind of Taiwanese snack food.

<http://tinyurl.com/otjny7j>

[128] What I'm translating as "fly across the rooftops" is a cool idiom that literally translates as "to fly across rooftops and vault over walls," and is often used to describe the flying about that goes on in wuxia novels.

Paper Airplane (4)

I looked at Ah Yi, battling to keep his balance on the telephone pole. How could I give up?

The doubt I had felt while traversing the sea floor once again appeared. Maybe the three of us were just outright lunatics.

Maybe the lost Heaven Reaching arts that Master was teaching us were just like the Reverse Nine Yin Manual that Ouyang Feng studied, and made your mind fuzzy [129]. And maybe that kind of fuzzy mind is so-called righteous ardor.

Relying on the incredible leg strength we had developed by resisting the currents on the ocean floor, it actually was not very difficult for Ah Yi and I to jump from telephone pole to telephone pole. However, to accurately judge the correct distance, not too short, not too far, was actually quite a skill to master.

Luckily, my body was strong, and I could handle an occasional fall to the street during the following months of practice.

Although, passersby on the street would stare at us, and that was quite different than the seafloor.

Their wide eyes and gaping mouths in some ways gave us much more pressure than the undercurrents and vortexes of the seafloor.

The immense pressure made our eyes bloodshot and dried our throats up.

"Mom, what are they doing?" A little girl pointed at Ah Yi and I. The loser adult standing next to her said, "They're ... they're... repairing the telephone poles."

My mouth dry, I leaped forward to escape the girls questioning.

Although Ah Yi's inner force was not as profound as mine, his leg strength was shocking, and his self-confidence sky high. He kept even pace with me as we evaded the curious pedestrians.

Jumping.

Jumping.

Jumping.

The youth of modern day kung fu practitioners!

"Bang!"

Ah Yi fell down to the street. He muttered a curse word and then jumped back onto the telephone pole.

I had no time to spare to even give him an encouraging glance. The

sweat on my face was making it difficult to keep my eyes open, and I almost tripped on a power line.

Finally, after who knows how long, Ah Yi and I reached the sea of trees at the base of Ba Gua Mountain.

I can't even explain how tired I was. I couldn't even feel my feet.

My legs trembled.

"This isn't that fun," gasped Ah Yi. He sat on the ground next to me, leaning against a tree trunk.

"Nope." I massaged my cramping calves and looked out at the lush green forest.

The trees were a lot closer together than the telephone poles in the city. In fact there was almost no distance at all between them.

I thought... perhaps if I could charge up Ba Gua mountain in one shot, then I wouldn't have to worry as much about focusing each and every step.

I wouldn't need to worry about balance, I would just focus on jumping from one thick branch to another. Jump, jump, jump all the way.

Ah Yi looked at me, and I looked at him. We looked as tired as two dogs who had just fought a battle with a lion.

"Race to the top." Ah Yi looked forward.

"Blah blah." I took in a deep breath.

We scampered up into the trees, charging forward, bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun.

Before, I'd always thought Ah Yi was cut out to be a gangster.

But now, he burned with the desire to become a great hero.

"You're really good!" I shouted, glancing ahead at a big tree.

"Of course!" Ah Yi shouted back, his feet flying beneath him.

"Your inner force can't match mine, but you can still keep up with me!" I shouted, looking like a clumsy bird as I jumped through the trees.

"You're just lazy!" laughed Ah Yi, jumping forward unsteadily.

In the setting sun, my shadow stretched out.

I was quite excited.

"I'm going to become the number one hero under heaven!" I shouted

loftily.

"I'm going to become the number one hero in the universe!" shouted Ah Yi, even louder. "I'm going to become... ahh! Ahh! Ahh!" The excitement in his voice changed into terror.

I figured he had missed a step. When I looked back, I saw Ah Yi, terror-stricken, screaming, "Get out of here!"

I stared dumbfounded at a huge cloud of bees, surging out from a tree right behind us.

"****! I just stepped on their hive!" Ah Yi's face was ashen, but his speed increased.

"Ahh!" I didn't really have time to even yell. [130]

Swarms and swarms of bees roiled forth, blackening the skies. "Master, save us!" I cried over and over.

Did Master come?

No.

It was truly shocking how the bees seemed to blot out the heavens and cover the entire earth!

A group of bees pressed close to Ah Yi, forcing him to jump down out of the trees.

Another group of bees was upon me, their buzzing a deafening drone in my ears. My heart in my throat, and I also figured I should jump down. But just then I heard Ah Yi shout, "There's people down here!" And then he jumped back up into the trees, his face covered in welts the size of steamed buns.

Yes, leading the bees down would only bring harm to innocents. Suddenly, I had an idea. I stamped down hard on a tree branch, then used a hacky-sack kicking technique to fling it up into the air. [131] I grabbed it, and with one swipe cleared it of twigs and leaves. "Ah Yi," I shouted. "Watch this!"

I made my stand against the enemy there on the tree. I circulated what little inner force I had remaining, using my "Yi Jing Sword" to take control of countless surrounding tree leaves and shoot them into the bees' formation, casting them into chaos.

Ah Yi immediately bent over and snapped off a tree branch, and then started using his strange "Peerless Hero Sword" to shoot leaves at the bees.

Two future Jianghu heroes, performing our sword arts for the first time in real combat, amongst the treetops. We held nothing back, using every aspect of the sword arts we ourselves had created to fight against the savage bees.

At this point in any novel, the action would definitely be described in

“slow motion.”

I need to clear something up.

At this point in my life, I felt no such special effect.

You wouldn't either.

Ah Yi and I shouted, but were almost completely drowned out by the buzz of the bees, which was about as loud as an atomic bomb.

Some people say that you can conquer fate, but the power of nature is truly difficult to contend with.

**

[129] Ouyang Feng is a well-known villain from Jin Yong's novels. The Nine Yin manual, and his method of studying it, as well as info about him can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/nofg9nc>

[130] Here he also makes a joke referencing a Chinese idiom that relates to bees but it's pretty much impossible to translate so I'm leaving it out.

[131] He actually doesn't use the word hacky-sack, but instead jianzi or shuttlecock, which is a game very similar to hacky-sack. Since I had never seen jianzi before coming to China, I will translate it as hacky sack, as I believe that makes it more more understandable to western audiences. Apparently, jianzi is known in America as Chinese hacky-sack.
<http://tinyurl.com/ljzvah>

Paper Airplane (5)

“****!” roared Ah Yi, “We’re hopelessly outnumbered!”

“Come on, golden boy!” I cried, waving my tree branch desperately. “Don’t let yourself get killed by these bastards!”

Ah Yi was thoroughly exhausted. He sat down and closed his eyes. The leafless tree branch slipped from his hands.

I sighed, glanced at the sinking sun, and began to cry.

Why did I cry?

Well, even though I possessed powerful martial arts, I could still cry.

I was a middle school student after all.

Tears streamed from Ah Yi’s closed eyes onto the bees which covered his body like a quilt.

The sun was so beautiful, except that it was blotted out by the ravenous bees. How poetic! How poetic!

It was difficult to watch the bees as they stabbed us relentlessly. They really were making a good show of it.

And then, I began to circulate the inner force that had built up in the time I had spent looking at the sun. I gathered up the maddeningly itchy bee venom flowing throughout my body, then raised my hands into the air and used Heaven Reaching Destruction Palm to expel it into the air.

Luckily, these were bees and not hornets; their venom wasn't very powerful. In an instant, the red welts on my body shrunk by about half. I walked over to Ah Yi and used my inner force to help him with his bee venom.

"I'm fine," he said weakly.

"You sound really tired," I said, channeling inner force into him.

"Look!" said Ah Yi, pointing over to some trees. As I turned my head, he shot ahead like an arrow. "I'm first!"

I cursed and raced after him.

"The Giant Buddha!" shouted Ah Yi excitedly.

"Watch me!" I shouted, racing along with Ah Yi until we stood below the Giant Buddha.

Two stones carved with the characters "Success" were directly on top of the stern-looking Buddha's giant head.

"How do we get up there?" Ah Yi seemed a little confused. I was even

more confused.

The Giant Buddha was much taller than the telephone poles. If we fell we would definitely be dead!

Furthermore, the Giant Buddha was super smooth, and almost completely perpendicular. It would be very difficult to summon the power to jump all the way up.

"Master obviously put the stones up there to show us that it's possible to reach them," I said.

"Master really is a psycho sometimes," said Ah Yi.

I was powerless to retort.

"Well, the sun hasn't set yet," I said. "Let's get up there!" I glanced at the darkening purple sky. After the sun set completely, we wouldn't be able to see, and then our precious little lives would most certainly be lost.

"Alright, let's do it," said Ah Yi with a deep sigh, rubbing his hands together.

"Let's see who can grab them. Don't push yourself too hard, though. Your life is the most important thing." I was nervous.

"You too." Ah Yi closed his eyes and began muttering a prayer, even though he didn't believe in any religion whatsoever.

"Go!"

"Go!"

But, just as we two disciples were about to leap up onto the Giant Buddha, we suddenly were frozen in place.

Two small pebbles flew out of from the distance, sealing our "Ding Dong" points. We literally couldn't move.

"There's no need to go up. Are you looking for these stones?" A voice rang out, old and hoarse.

The speaker had no eyes.

Only two deep, black pits.

"Take me to the person who put these stones here," said the old man, his voice cold.

And then he crushed the stones into pieces.

What fearsome strength!

Ah Yi and I began to tremble. We felt as if the sickly purple sky had begun to swallow us up.

And then I noticed someone sitting on one of the stone lions, someone quite familiar. He stared at us curiously.

Chomping on a grilled squid just like before, his hair blond just like before, his smile brilliant just like before.

In the blond foreigner's hand was a toy cardboard plane. He threw it toward me and Ah Yi.

I was pretty sure I had seen this particular toy airplane before.

"Let's go," said the fearsome, eyeless man in a cold voice.

He grabbed Ah Yi and I and left the Giant Buddha Square.

I couldn't help but wonder, how could a person with no eyes move about so freely?

The eyeless man carried me and Ah Yi like we were tiny chicks. He leaped into the trees that covered the mountain. As they flew by underfoot, my heart filled with desolation.

This eyeless man's lightness arts were very advanced. He carried me and Ah Yi, moving forward lightly, ceaselessly. And yet there seemed to be no trace of life in him whatsoever.

He was like a corpse with high level martial arts.

Ah Yi's face was pale as death. I knew what he was thinking. He was thinking ...

This horrifying eyeless person was undoubtedly Lan Jin!

And if he was Lan Jin, then Ah Yi and I were merely waiting to be torn to shreds.

But hadn't Master killed an eyeless assassin just yesterday?

Could it be that Lan Jin hadn't died? The next day he'd crawled up out of the dirt to come after master a second time to duel?

I couldn't figure it out.

I could only tremble.

At the foot of Bagua Mountain, the intersection next to the cultural section was packed with cars.

The eyeless man stopped. "Which direction?"

"Didn't you go there already yesterday?" I said weekly.

"Which direction?" he asked again

"Just go straight!" snapped Ah Yi. "Cross the street and keep going straight!"

Then the man, carrying Ah Yi and I, shot forward through the speeding cars with astonishing speed, straight toward my house.

The eyeless man sped through the city, attracting the attention of tons of people. And he also caused me to start thinking.

This eyeless man's aura of death was very low key, unlike the extremely sinister aura of death from yesterday, which had nearly rent my soul in two.

And there seemed to be no wounds on this man's body.

Was this the same eyeless man from yesterday?

I dared not ask.

He came to a stop in front of my house. The two dark pits on his face seemed to stare up at the hole in wall.

Ah Yi and I could only stand there like two little fish flopped onto the seashore, staring wide-eyed.

Paper Airplane (6)

"Do you know who I am?" asked the eyeless man coldly, his hands gripping our necks.

My back stiffened.

"Lan Jin?" I forced the words out of my mouth.

The eyeless man stood behind me. "Then you should know how I do things," he said emotionlessly.

So it was Lan Jin Suddenly, I could smell the stench of urine on both myself and Ah Yi.

Lan Jin, the ruthless monster, planned to decapitate us as a battle sacrifice before his fight to the death with Master.

For the first time, I felt the true power of evil.

It was a type of dread that could dash all hopes.

"You... your... eyes?" asked Ah Yi, breathing raggedly. It seemed he was trying to buy us some time.

"I dug them out myself." His reply was as cold-blooded as his sharp fingertips.

He slowly dug his fingers into our necks. He seemed as if he were enjoying some appetizers before a banquet.

I looked at the gaping hole, but could not sense Master's aura of death.

Perhaps Master was still on Bagua mountain gathering vegetables.

Farewell forever, Master.

Hope did not exist.

All was crisis.

Death.

Emptiness.

And then I thought of Yi Jing.

"Bam!"

I fell forward, launching a palm strike at Ah Yi.

Ah Yi fell along with me to the ground.

Lan Jin could never have anticipated that I would secretly break through the seals on my acupuncture points. And he could never have foreseen my palm strike against Ah Yi.

Just when he was about to reach out and grab us, a wave of "Cherub Markers" [132] flew out of the giant hole, flying straight toward Lan Jin!

Flying right behind the cloud of "Cherub Markers," was a mighty hero wielding a diabolo stick!

Dozens of markers slammed into the road, sending chunks of asphalt flying everywhere.

But Lan Jin was nowhere to be seen.

He was shooting up into the air!

A green light descended.

Darkness ascended to meet it.

Blood spattered onto the shadows cast by the murky light of the streetlamps.

"Bang!"

Master alighted next to me, smiling.

He laughed.

Lan Jin slammed into the tall, curved streetlamp on the other side of the street and then slowly slid down.

He never opened his eyes.

Because he didn't have eyes.

But sticking out between the holes, was half of a diabolo stick.

The other half was clasped tightly in his hand.

A long streak of blood streaked down the streetlamp.

And it was finished.

I swore that I would get a new quilt.

Having wrapped up two corpses, it no longer was a quilt but a shroud, or perhaps even a crude coffin.

Master buried Lan Jin in a remote part of Ba Gua mountain. When he returned to the hole, he saw Ah Yi and I sitting on the bed, both of us in a stupor.

"Today was truly a thrilling day." He held a few wild pheasant eggs. "We need to eat up tonight!"

I sighed. "Lan Jin was really scary."

Ah Yi didn't want to say anything. His mind was still fixed on that moment just before our necks were nearly split open.

"It is good that you unsealed your acupuncture points," praised Master. "I really was not sure which moment to make my move."

Ah Yi finally opened his mouth. "If Yuan Zai..." His eyes were blank.

Master rapped him lightly on the head. "Call him senior apprentice!"

"If senior apprentice hadn't unsealed his acupuncture points, would we have been killed by your marker attack?"

Master shook his head and said, "If you had remained hostage, I would have been forced to chop off one of my arms and give it to Lan Jin in exchange for your little lives."

I was somewhat moved, but then Master continued: "However, Lan Jin's cruelty knows no bounds. Who is to say he might not have sliced off your heads just to make a point."

Thinking back, I realized that we really had just narrowly escaped death.

Master cracked open the pheasant eggs. The thick yolk flowed into the cold hotpot.

I lifted it up and handed it to Master. "I'm dead tired. First running around and jumping, then getting my acupuncture points sealed by Lan Jin. I think my inner force has been completely used up."

Master took the hotpot. His hands seemed to be trembling slightly.

"Master," I said, alarmed. "Were you injured?"

Both yesterday and today, Master had faced off against top-notch experts. How could he not have sustained injuries?

Master coughed lightly. "Last night's injury was inconsequential. But just now I was worried he would hurt you, so I was a bit distracted. Lan Jin hit my chest with a palm. I almost lost my life."

Ah Yi and I looked at each other, and then strangely, at the exact same moment, stretched out our hands and placed them on Master's back, imparting healing inner force into his body.

He didn't object to our good intentions. "But," he said with a note of suspicion, "Why would Lan Jin dig out his own eyes?"

Ah Yi closed his own eyes. "Was the eyeless assassin from last night the same one as today?"

Master nodded. "Definitely not."

I didn't think so either.

Yet, eyeless people are not very common.

Eyeless master killers are even more rare.

And in the space of two days, we had encountered two.

"Last night's assassin was very powerful," Master muttered. "But he was not as good as tonight's. To be honest, I am really confused as to whether or not tonight's killer really was Lan Jin."

Could it be that Lan Jin dug out his eyes so that Master wouldn't recognize him?

This really was the most bizarre part of it all.

Lan Jin was incredibly conceited. Why would he disfigure himself only to conceal his identity?

Also, if the first eyeless assassin wasn't Lan Jin, then who was he?

A lackey trained by Lan Jin?

A disciple trained by Lan Jin?

“No.” This was Master’s explanation: “Lan Jin always operated alone. He never gave a single thought to passing on his martial arts to anyone else.”

**

[132] I assume this is a brand of markers popular in Taiwan during the 80s. I couldn't find any information about it.

Paper airplane (7)

Master's suspicions were hard to dispel, although Ah Yi and I were quite happy.

That night's hotpot meal was punctuated with a lot of big question marks.

Luckily, the third day did not have a third eyeless person.

Thanks to Ah Yi's and my rigorous protestations, Master finally switched our lightness arts practice time to night.

Ah Yi and I wanted to train in high level martial arts, not train in how to submit to shaming.

No, it wasn't how to submit to shaming, it was how to embrace it!

And so, in the dead of night, Ah Yi and I, dressed up in ninja costumes, jumped from telephone pole to telephone pole in the city center and flew about amidst the sea of trees that blanketed Ba Gua mountain.

And of course, one starry night, we actually were able to reach the top of the Giant Buddha.

Because the secrets of martial arts studies are not to be advertised, I can't reveal how exactly Ah Yi and I flew to the top of the Buddha's head. But I can tell you, it was an amazing feeling to stand up there and gaze at

the stars.

After some time, when our lightness arts had begun to progress, Master tied lead weights onto our legs and required us to jump around the telephone poles without relying on strength generated by using our knees. Simply put, we weren't allowed to bend our legs, and had to jump around like the stupid zombies from the movie "Mr. Vampire." [133]

"Why can't we bend our knees?" protested Ah Yi. "We can't even jump that way!"

"If you use your inner force, you can jump," insisted Master. "Then if you add your muscle strength, you'll be able to jump even higher."

"What we mean is, what kind of martial arts will this help us train?" In my opinion, the training method was pointless.

"By training your leg strength to a high level, you can increase the stamina of your inner force." Having said that, Master threw us onto the telephone poles.

Jumping without bending your knees really was a son of a *****.

It took four nights before we could succeed. We constantly fell, and actually damaged quite a few cars and caught the attention of patrolling police on several occasions.

The failures really put a damper on the relationship between master and us disciples. In fact, our "Snake Venom Expelling Qi Training," and "In-

room Sword Technique Creation,” went on with barely a word spoken.

Thankfully, after several days, our hopping vampire jumping worked, and we were able to successfully leap a succession of ten poles. Master embraced us tearfully, and the hard feelings dissipated.

Studying martial arts was really great.

Many years later, after countless nights of shouldering chunks of cement and practicing “Hopping Vampire” techniques on Ba Gua mountain, a folk tale emerged: a group of hopping vampires had come from mainland China to haunt the mountains of Taiwan!

My training on Ba Gua mountain was how the legends of hopping vampires in Changsha came to be.

My training on Ahli mountain in Chiayi county was how legends of hopping vampires in Chiayi came to be. [134]

My training in East China was how the legends of fearsome hopping vampires all over the region came to be.

But that happened maybe three or four years later.

**

[133] Mr. Vampire was a Hong Kong hopping vampire movie:
<http://tinyurl.com/ygvanfd>. Here’s some info on hopping vampires:

<http://tinyurl.com/m34csc9>

[134] Chiayi, a county in south Taiwan. <http://tinyurl.com/3hecde>. Alishan mountain or Alishan is a mountain preserve there:
<http://tinyurl.com/mu7s7za>

Part 5

Yi Jing looked me in the eyes. "If you really think that, why do you kill people? In your heart you should know, our world and Master's wuxia world are totally different. Totally different!"

"Because nobody has the power to decide who lives and dies," I continued, "bastards who end other's lives cannot be allowed to continue on in this world."

Justice and the Law (1)

I wish I could have stretched out time to allow more chances for practicing martial arts. Those days were full of sweat and happiness.

Throughout the following two years, Master would go out during the day to carry out acts of chivalry. In the evening, after we got off of school, we would practice sword arts and palm techniques. When Yi Jing wasn't taking cram lessons, she would join me and Ah Yi and listen to some of Master's strange stories about the martial world. How we would laugh! Late at night, underneath the silver moonlight, Ah Yi and I would put on masks and fly over the rooftops and walls in the city center, or practice our hopping vampire jumping on the telephone poles.

When vacation times came, Master would take us to the seaside for walks.

Or rather, Master and Yi Jing would go for walks while Ah Yi and I picked up trash on the ocean floor. We picked up trash and practiced sword forms in the roiling current.

Actually, it was really fun. The seafloor truly is incomparably marvelous. Once we ran into a cuttlefish [135] which had come up from the super deep sea. I got really excited, and started to fight it with a Mahjong tile rack [136], thinking I could drag it up to the beach for a tasty meal. But it blasted my face with a bunch of ink, nearly blinding me.

Ah Yi wasn't as lucky. The giant cuttlefish latched onto him with its suckers and dragged him down toward the deep ocean trench. I couldn't see anything, so I had to determine their location by listening to the changes in the currents. I chopped off its tentacles and dragged half-dead Ah Yi to the shore. He threw up a bunch of seawater, but then we realized that he was still gripping the cuttlefish tentacles that I'd chopped off. We cooked them with our inner force, and then the four of us sat happily on the beach, munching them for dinner.

During that seemingly endless summer, other students went on stupid China Youth Corps camping trips [137]. But our four member kung fu team underwent special training in the jungle. We forged our way deep into Taiwan's Eastern Rift Valley [138] to practice martial arts among the vipers and wild beasts.

While the stupid China Youth Corps was performing its "Number One dance," Ah Yi and I were "bamming" out unforgettable memories atop moss-covered boulders.

By the way, why did I call it a "Four Member Kung Fu Team?" Because Master accepted Yi Jing as his first female disciple, which was also a first

for the Heaven Reaching sect.

However, Yi Jing didn't undergo as much training as us. I don't think it was because Master was a chauvinist or something. No, it was because he couldn't make himself use the more horrific training methods on her, like having poisonous snakes bite her. He did have a soft side after all.

Ah Yi and I used lightness arts to fly like swans around the jungle and catch our meal for the day. Yi Jing would train with Master in inner force circulation techniques. Actually, the scariest part of the jungle was all the poisonous snakes and plants. But, we got used to it. Even if we got bitten by a banded krait, we could expel the poison in two minutes or less.

Compared to the seafloor, the jungle wasn't very frightening at all. The most dangerous animal I ran into was a Formosan black bear. [139]

One day, Yi Jing and I were hiding from a colony of bees when suddenly we saw two black bears. They snuggled there, holding a beehive that I had accidentally kicked while carrying Yi Jing during my lightness arts practice. (Please note: a beehive is one of many dangerous things that one might accidentally step on when practicing lightness arts)

This black bear couple swooped down and chomped up the honey-filled beehive together. Yi Jing and I felt happy for them. Smiling, we squatted to the side and watched them enjoy their feast.

The black bears were kings of the jungle, and I had actually fought them before on two different occasions... but I wasn't scared of them in the least, and eventually Yi Jing and I became close friends with them.

“Even though they aren’t pets,” said Yi Jing, “I think we should give them names. One is a bit bigger and one is a bit smaller. Let’s call them Biggy and Smally!”

Yeah, we named them, even though they weren’t pets. Because Biggy and Smally had picked names for me and Yi Jing as well. I was “Huffy” and she was “Sniffy.” So it was fair.

Suddenly it started raining. Biggy and Smally nuzzled each other and curled up together next to us. The circumstances were very stirring. I held up a lotus leaf to shield Yi Jing from the rain, then leaned toward her and kissed her soft lips.

In the summer vacation between my second and third years of middle school, I held Yi Jing in the rain. Her face glowed red.

For the rest of my life, I will never forget that kiss.

We said farewell to Biggy and Smally. We said farewell to the poisonous snakes. And then, our four person kung fu team’s happy and sweaty summer vacation came to an end. We had no choice but to return to check in for our third year of strenuous middle school work.

Because poisonous snakes weren’t very easy to collect, they couldn’t provide us with the quality practice we needed. And so we began to train against Master’s palm strikes. Ah Yi could withstand eleven before falling down, whereas I could stand up against sixty-two.

As for sword technique, it is much more difficult to gauge. There is no

way we could withstand Master's shockingly fast lightning attack.

And yet, Master seemed to be quite pleased with us. "In a few days," he said, "Master will accompany you as you take your first step into the true Jianghu. You will slay corrupt officials and evil tyrants!"

The day I had looked forward to with dread was finally approaching.

Night darkened. A group of men with crew cuts and black suits filed out of a massage parlor.

In the middle of them was an enormously fat man. A glossy smile covered his face as he pulled along a young woman with him. She looked at the ground.

The girl's eyes were red and swollen.

"That's him." Master's slipped a mask onto his face.

Ah Yi and I were wearing a plastic Astroboy mask and a plastic Gundam mask respectively. [140]

Punitive justice cannot be hidden away.

Inner torment cannot be hidden away.

Fear cannot be hidden away.

The purpose of studying kung fu is justice.

We had been waiting for this exact moment.

But, now that the moment had arrived, I could not help but ask myself: what is justice?

If what we were about to do really could be called justice, then why was my entire body shaking?

Master and disciples, the three of us, hid in the dark little alley next to the massage parlor, waiting for the right moment to strike.

The big fatty placed his sick fingers onto the young woman's buttocks and rubbed her.

Surrounding him were about eight burly men, covered with tattoos of dragons and tigers. I could feel them easily.

But, the two standing closest to the fat man had bulges at their waists. I was pretty sure they were handguns. That was definitely a problem.

**

[135] Here's what a cuttlefish looks like <http://tinyurl.com/pme8v8q>

[136] Here's some images of what he's talking about, the Mahjong tile

rack. Not sure if there's a better translation. <http://tinyurl.com/m2cdk4h>

[137] A Taiwanese youth organization <http://tinyurl.com/k2vrzss>

[138] The Eastern Rift Valley is also known as Huatung Valley. Article: <http://tinyurl.com/mymzaxt>. Official website: <http://tinyurl.com/lbwqsfy>

[139] The Formosan black bear is native to Taiwan. The literal translation from Chinese is Taiwan black bear <http://tinyurl.com/lwqot79>

[140] He actually specifically refers to Mobile Suit Zeta Gundam, but I'm just saying Gundam for simplicity's sake.

Justice and the Law (2)

"Master, are we really going to kill that fat pig?" Underneath his mask, Ah Yi was as hesitant as me.

"That depends on you two," said Master.

His answer seemed to place most of the responsibility on us.

"Master, do we really have to go that far?" My voice trembled.

Killing, no matter what the reason, was something extremely serious, especially to a third year middle school student.

Whether it was killing for justice, or killing for revenge, killing is still killing.

Master didn't say anything more, because everything he'd wanted to say, had been said an hour ago.

One hour ago, in the cave.

"The Heaven Reaching sect's task this time is to kill a local tyrant named Huang Shifeng. Thanks to his dirty money, he usually can be found in the company of Bamboo Sect villains [141]. He is known to oppresses the good, commits evil deeds and tarnish the purity of young girls. Master has been keeping an eye on him for a while." Cut and dry.

A cut and dry reason to kill someone.

"Killing a bad guy, this way ... is it really that cut and dry?" My mind was completely blank.

Actually, from the very beginning I didn't want to kill.

I didn't truly want to kill anybody, not even Uncle Wang.

But if I opened my mouth and said to Master, "I don't want to kill anyone," wouldn't it be taking all of his hard work in teaching us martial arts and flushing it down the toilet?

"If you don't want to kill anyone, then so be it," said Master coolly. It was as if he could read my mind.

"What do you mean?" said Ah Yi resolutely. "Senior Disciple is scared of killing, but not me. Not even a little bit." Of course, an hour later he was singing quite a different tune.

"Killing is a fearsome thing," said Master, sounding irritated. "Of course, holding back is ideal, but the greatest fear is that the criminals will never change, and will in fact most likely become worse."

Master looked at the masks sitting there on the ground and continued: "One practices martial arts not to build character or improve one's health, and definitely not to understand the meaning or mysteries of life. One

practices martial arts for a much more practical reason, and that reason is justice! When society is sinking into degeneration, when crafty and evil people hold power, chivalrous martial artists must arise to champion justice. A hero must understand right and wrong, must comprehend good and bad. And more important, he must be courageous enough to take the responsibility to implement and carry out justice."

Master suddenly turned. His hand shot out and his fingers stabbed into the cement wall.

"On occasion, justice requires that we understand why another's life must be taken. It requires the courage to accept horrific guilt. This is because justice is not about one's own sense of integrity." Master's eyes shone with a strange light.

His words broke through the barriers in my heart.

He was right. Justice was not about one's own sense of integrity.

Execute those who deserve to be executed. The sin of killing cannot be avoided..

This is the destiny of a great hero.

"But Master, even though the bad guys deserve to die, isn't killing people breaking the law?" said Ah Yi suddenly.

Master nodded, and then shook his head. "Who do the laws of society protect?"

In our society, corrupt business people controlled everything, so I said, "It protects rich people... And maybe even the bad guys, too."

Master smiled bitterly. "Perhaps you are right. But if the law is implemented correctly, those being protected are good people, the common people. The law is actually a weapon to be used by the weak, a tool for the weak to use to oppose the tyrants!"

I was confused. The law was good, and could protect the weak members of society. Then why should great heroes break the law and kill people?

Master continued: "However, we are not weak."

Ah Yi's eyes lit up. "So the strong don't need the law!"

Master rustled Ah Yi's hair. "That is right. The law was established for the weak, built for the good but fragile, to allow them to fight for their lives. It is good. But the strong do not need law. The strong can resist evil without help."

The strong do not need law! Great!

But I could not help but ask another stupid question. "So this ... it's really okay?"

Master seemed dumbfounded. "That is why I taught you lightness arts."

"Oh?" Now I, too, was dumbfounded.

Master smiled. "If you get caught, of course you'll be in trouble. But if you don't get caught, then no problem."

Ah Yi grinned. "Don't worry Master," he laughed. "Senior apprentice and I are already super good at flying around fleeing for our lives!"

Master picked up the masks and looked them over. "You had better be. If you get captured by the constables, it will not be a huge problem. But if the criminals' bullets catch you, you will lose your lives."

To lose one's life ... that price is too high for anyone.

An hour later, standing in the dark alley, I had no way to escape the solemn pressure of justice.

Ah Yi couldn't either. His aura of death flickered weakly.

Master could sense our uneasiness, but he said nothing.

As far as Master was concerned, there was no age requirement for great heroes. He was not asking two middle school students to kill. In his eyes, concealed behind the masks were two newborn calves just waiting to manifest the courageous spirit of a hero.

Standing next to the fat man's car stood a guy with a crew cut and

sunglasses. He opened the car door.

"Now!" said Master quietly, his aura of death burning.

It didn't matter how many there were!

Ah Yi and I gave each other five and then charged out of the alley, leaping directly onto the black car.

Boom! We slammed down onto the car roof. The tough guys didn't even have a chance to react. Ah Yi and I were on the attack!

Target: The two guys with the guns!

A skinny guy with a five-o'clock shadow flew back and slammed into the corrugated security gate of the adjacent shop. He didn't even have a chance to draw his gun.

The other guy, a fierce-looking tough, vomited up his recent meal as I punched his stomach, snatched his gun and tossed it into a nearby mail dropbox.

"****!"

"Shit!"

"What the hell!"

"Kill them!" (142)

All the other guys started cussing and pulling out glinting knives. Their eyes shone with cruelty, even more cruel than the reek of gore which emanated from the blades of their weapons.

**

[141] What Master refers to as the Bamboo Sect is a real criminal triad organization based in Taiwan. <http://tinyurl.com/msxcdo3>

[142] The guys are speaking really native Taiwanese slang. I had to do quite a bit of searching on Baidu before I could understand it...

Justice and the Law (3)

Four razor-sharp sushi knives stabbed toward us simultaneously.

And then we flew into the air.

Yi Jing Sword Technique! I attacked like lightning!

Four of the brutes slowly sank to the ground, their wide eyes fading into unconsciousness.

Ah Yi's strange shapeless sword technique was amazing.

"What do you want?" asked the fatty nervously, in a high-pitched, girly voice. "What gang are you from?"

In front of the fat guy were two bodyguards, fists clenched.

"Uh... let me think..." I stuttered, my heart racing.

"We're here to take your life!" blurted Ah Yi.

The fatty didn't even so much as frown. It seemed Ah Yi's response wasn't of much interest to him.

"How much money do you want?" He pulled a checkbook out from his

jacket. "You guys are pretty skilled. Have you thought about coming to work for me? I can pay three times more than anyone else."

Even when his life was threatened, he tried to use money to win people over. He really was a crime boss.

I was worried that a patrol car would come around soon, so I took a step forward and pushed out with both of my hands. The two towering bodyguards shot like marbles into the massage parlor door.

The fatty's face grew pale.

Ah Yi held a mahjong tile rack. He pointed it at the fatty's nose and said, "Remember to be a good guy in your next life." With that, Ah Yi tightened his grip on the tile rack. It looked like he was getting ready to cut the fatty down.

But the mahjong rack just stayed there in mid-air.

For a long time, the weak-kneed fatty, the petrified girl, me, Ah Yi, all just stared at the mahjong tile rack, which could snuff out a life in a split second.

What was the rack hesitating about?

"Bro," Ah Yi finally said, "how about you do it."

The flute in my hand trembled.

"I... I don't know." My mind was in chaos. I just wasn't ready to take a life.

Suddenly, a feeling of self-loathing filled me.

"How come you're such a bad guy!" I said sternly. I slashed at the car with my flute, slicing a big hole in the trunk. The flute tip cracked.

The fatty stared in shock. And then his pants darkened as he urinated himself.

"I'm... I'm... I'm sorry..." he mumbled.

"Don't you know you'll get yourself killed!" I roared. I slashed again at the car with my flute. The taillight shattered.

Tears streamed down his fat face. "Please..." he said. "Please give me ... another chance. I'll be a new person!"

I suppressed the feelings of confusion and terror that welled up in my heart and slashed my flute through the air. It whistled strangely.

"Will you change?" I howled.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ah Yi said, poking me.

"Will you change?" I shouted hysterically, watching as the fatty dropped to his knees.

He knocked his head onto the ground as he kowtowed. "I will definitely change! I will change, I will change! I will change, I will change! Everything is my fault! I will change!"

I smashed my flute into a nearby streetlight, and it shattered into several pieces. My fury was beginning to subside.

"You'd better change!" I shouted at the fatty as he begged for his life.

When a person, a bad person, faces a life or death situation like this, what meaning is there in their promises and oaths?

Was he really begging for mercy?

Was it a temporary strategy?

Or just simple lies?

Could it be that he truly experienced a flash of realization?

It wasn't.

Even though I was quite young at that time, I knew it was none of those things.

At a time like that, his making of promises was no different than an insect responding to stimulus.

Promises like that are really senseless symbols, meaningless.

I wasn't naïve.

And yet, sometimes I could allow myself to be naïve.

Perhaps I had no choice. Right?

After hearing his answer, his promise, I lost my position as arbiter of justice. If I took his despicable life, in the future, I would always wonder whether or not I had done the right thing.

If I killed him, he would never have a chance to be a new person.

Everyone should have that chance.

"What are you gonna do?" stuttered Ah Yi.

"Spare him," I said quietly, looking down at the pitiful fatty. He looked like a begging dog.

Maybe I had intentionally set up this untenable situation.

Maybe I had been ready to let him off from the very beginning.

I was weak. It seemed I could not shoulder the grievous responsibility required of a great hero.

"Alright," said Ah Yi, sounding a bit more relaxed. "You need to be a new person from now on, don't forget it. Otherwise we'll be back to kill you."

"Don't forget what you said." In the distance I heard the sound of police car sirens.

Ah Yi and I looked at each other, and then looked at Master, who still stood there, concealed in the shadows of the alley. Then we leaped up onto the streetlight and flew off into the night.

Beneath the flickering moonlight and neon signs remained a bunch of unconscious thugs and a kowtowing fatty.

Hopefully the scars on his forehead would remind him of his promise.

Ah Yi and I stood on top of the giant Buddha, the meeting place set earlier by Master.

"Why did you let him go?" asked Ah Yi, sitting down next to me and sighing.

"Could you do it?" I said bitterly.

"If you hadn't let him go, and I had a chance to think about it a bit, maybe I could have," he replied resolutely.

"If you had to think about it first, then it means you couldn't have done it."

It looked like he was about to say something, but then he held it back.

"Do you think Master is gonna be angry?" I asked.

Ah Yi rested his head on his hands. It seemed he too was thinking about this.

"He won't!"

Justice and the Law (4)

Master dropped down next to us lightly like an agile finch. [143]

I couldn't even look him in the eye.

"As Master said, you two have your own view regarding justice. Master will not force you to do anything." He sat down.

Ah Yi sighed. "Killing is not as easy as I imagined."

"Wrong," said Master with a laugh. "Killing is not difficult. What is difficult is deciding who deserves to be killed."

That was true.

The true difficulty lay there.

But should people really decide who deserves to die? Shouldn't gods decide?

And if people can't get in touch with the gods, there is Law. Law can decide who deserves to live or die.

But Master just kicks the law to the side, bringing for his own theory of "Justice which supersedes Law."

I gazed at the lonely crescent moon overhead. "Master," I said desolately, "I know that before you said the police and the bad guys are basically teamed up, but nowadays there are good policemen. Why not just turn the bad guys over to the police department and let the law decide who to kill?"

"If that is your decision, Master cannot refuse." He laughed.

His laugh contained a little bit of derision, but a little bit of sympathy, too.

"Master," I asked, "don't tell me that when you kill you don't feel even some amount of guilt?"

I was a little bit angry.

"Master," asked Ah Yi, "when you kill, don't tell me that you don't think about it over and over beforehand."

"When Master kills, he has nothing to hide and feels no remorse!" he laughed. "As for consideration, I definitely think about it over and over before taking action."

I decided to use the argument of humanity. "Master, the people you kill, aren't they other peoples' husbands and fathers?"

"That is why justice requires courage," he said coldly.

I was starting to be quite dissatisfied with Masters' reasoning. "Well, if you kill people, aren't you robbing them of their opportunity to change?"

Master nodded. "That is unavoidable. Master must also appraise the scoundrel's prospects of reform."

"How do you do that?" blurted out Ah yi. "Don't tell me you watch them all day every day?"

Master shrugged. "If their crimes are not very serious, it doesn't hurt to watch them for a few extra months. After all, it is human life we are talking about."

"What about the really bad villains? What if they want a chance to turn over a new leaf?"

Master laughed confidently. "I kill them immediately."

"Why not lock them up?" I said angrily. "Lock them up in prison! Lock them up for fifteen or twenty years until they are ready to change. Like you just said, Master, life is life!"

Master shook his head. "True villains cannot reform. Sending them to their graves early is a service to all."

In my opinion, Master was being impervious to reason. He really was from the barbaric Ming dynasty.

"How do you know!" I said loudly. "Let me ask you, that fatty just now, were his crimes serious or not?!"

Master looked at me sternly. "If it were me," he said earnestly, "I would not have hesitated a bit. I would have taken off his head immediately."

I looked back at him sternly. "Why not watch him a few more days? You can kill him any time you want!"

Master slapped his palm down onto the Giant Buddha's head. "Wait for him to commit more crimes?" he said angrily. "Do you what that means?! After you let him go, every person he hurts is your responsibility! By the time you go after him, would it not be too late?"

Master was getting really mad, but I just yelled, "Yeah, but if he really, truly is willing to change, then you just killed a good person!"

"I guarantee you he will not change!" shouted Master, his face red. "When it comes time for me to kill him, as long as he is a bastard deserving of death, then that is enough for me!"

"You're killing a bad guy who might change!" I belted out.

Master raised his voice even more. "There is no way he could change!" he yelled. "Not after I kill him!"

"That's because you don't want him to change!" I said angrily.

"True bastards never change!" he said furiously.

"You're so unreasonable!"

"You abet evil by tolerating it!"

"Stop fighting," said Ah Yi tensely.

Poor Ah Yi stood between Master and I as we stared at each other.

"You're both right and you're both wrong," he said, his face flushed with embarrassment. "Just ... just stop fighting."

"How am I wrong!" Master said, turning his attention to Ah Yi.

Ah Yi's face looked like it was about to burst. His hoodlum temperament was about to break out.

I looked at Master and let out a deep sigh. "Good night, Master."

Master looked at me in disbelief as I leaped down and disappeared into the darkness of the Ba Gua mountain forest.

Killing!

"I approve of what you said."

So, Yi Jing agreed with me.

"Even just thinking about killing people makes me feel horrible." She put down her chopsticks.

"Just thinking that my two friends might become killers makes me feel weird." Ah Lun scrapped together the rice in his bowl.

Ah Yi's face twisted. "At first I didn't think I would mind killing, but last night, hearing the two of them arguing, I decided I really couldn't."

I nodded. "We simply just aren't killers. Turning the bad guys over to the police is good enough. It'll make a big difference in the long run; society will eventually change for the better."

"You're correct," said Yi Jing. "But, you should still apologize to Master. He's so old and miserable."

I knew that.

But I just couldn't dissipate my hard feelings.

Yi Jing looked at me. "Master worked so hard to teach you martial arts," she said. "You should give him a little bit of a break."

I nodded. She was right.

That night, Master didn't show up in the cave.

He was still mad at me.

Ah Yi and I practiced sword and palm techniques for three or four hours, but he never appeared.

**

[143] The finch referred to here is specifically a European siskin. Since I've never even heard of a siskin before, I chose to go with the more general term finch. <http://tinyurl.com/q8ou248>

Justice and the Law (5)

"Let's go out and look for Master," I suggested. "We can get a midnight snack while we're at it."

"Alright," yawned Ah Yi. "What do we eat?"

"The correct question should be: how do we find Master?"

We went to the night market in front of the county government building, and went to all the food stalls that we had previously eaten at with Master.

It wasn't the most diligent of search methods; after all, the chances of Master showing up here were really small. Might as well just say we came to fill up our stomachs.

And then, Ah Yi reached out and pinched me.

I followed his gaze until I saw three tough guys squeezed together in front of a stall.

One of them was the unlucky skinny guy who Ah Yi had sent flying with a palm strike. The three of them were having a profanity-laced discussion about last night's events. Ah Yi and I sat down and ordered two plates of sesame noodles and two bowls of pig intestine soup.

"Brother Feng must have really been scared," said one of the toughs.

"Otherwise why would he let you have so much time off?"

"Yeah right," said the skinny guy. "I have to go back in a little bit to take a shift. There's a lot of us, so rotating through takes a while. I still have time to get back."

The other tough said, "Mother****er! If Brother Feng knew who the morons are that scared him, they'd be dead."

The skinny guy laughed. "Exactly. A couple dozen guys with guns, it don't matter if those two morons can fight, they'd be on their way to the grave in two or three seconds."

The skinny guy suddenly lowered his voice, "Too bad for that girl from last night. After she saw Brother Feng get humiliated, he took her back and pumped her up with so many drugs she OD'd. We wrapped the corpse up in a trash bag and dropped her in the river somewhere."

Ah Yi and I had developed incredible hearing, so we heard the skinny guy's whispers quite clearly.

It felt like my ears were on fire. The chopsticks in my hand snapped.

One of the other toughs said, "Dying that way isn't bad. It's better than being beaten to death by Brother Feng like that call girl from this afternoon. Getting caught up in one of his rages is really unlucky."

The three of them threw some money down and left. Ah Yi and I hadn't even eaten a bite.

"You?" I said.

"Yeah," replied Ah Yi.

I left some money on the table and began following the three guys, keeping a wide distance.

Ah Yi spotted some people selling masks on the street corner, so he bought two. As for what they were masks of, I can't really remember clearly.

That was because my eyes were filled ... with the image of the fatty banging his head against the ground last night.

Finally, the skinny guy parted from the other two toughs. With a wave of his hand, he hopped onto a tricked out motorcycle and rode off in the direction of Dapu township [144].

Ah Yi and I jumped up onto the electricity poles and leaped into pursuit.

I knew what kind of mood Ah Yi was in.

Because I felt equally remorseful.

What Master had said was completely correct. The real bad guys truly are beyond any hope.

It was a huge villa, really huge, nestled in the suburbs.

However, despite being so large, the sounds of a woman begging and pleading could not be muffled within.

Ah Yi and I stood in a tree on the hillside behind the big house.

From the auras of death emanating from within the house, it seemed there were at least twenty or more people inside.

Or you could say, at least twenty or more people carrying deadly handguns.

"How many?" asked Ah Yi.

"Twenty plus." I said. "There are eight or nine gathered together on the third floor. I bet that's where the fatty is."

"What do we do?" said Ah Yi, snapped off two sturdy tree branches.

"We have to be faster than bullets." My heart was completely resolute.

"Faster than bullets." He handed one of the tree branches to me.

"Faster than bullets." I stretched out my hand.

High five!

Two masked figures descended from the hillside, landing like ghosts onto the water tower on the roof of the big house.

"There's..." Standing next to the water tower was a man. He said one word, and then nothing more, ever.

Voices rose below, and auras of death exploded out.

"If..." Ah Yi drifted off, looking like he wanted to say something.

"There's no ifs." I looked at Ah Yi.

"No ifs." His eyes suddenly filled with confidence.

"No," I said.

Without another word, the two of us flipped down.

"Master, how can we win against guns?" I asked.

Master: "Be faster."

Me: "Faster?"

Master: "Palms are faster than guns, and Qi is faster than bullets."

Me: "But Ah Yi and I still can't wield invisible Qi swords yet!"

Master: "Then use good forms to make up for the lack in speed."

Me: "Use good forms to make up for the lack in speed?"

Two masked figures flipped down, landing on the fourth floor handrail, and separated.

"They..." A man, too slow in loading his hand gun, suddenly saw blood spurting from his neck. The gun dropped to the ground.

"Ah—" Another guy covered his eyes and cried out. The bullets from his gun smacked into the ground.

Instantly, three men burst out of various bedroom doors. All of them had guns in their hands.

"Go back up!" I said.

Ah Yi and I flipped up once again toward the water tower. We could hear the sound of bullets flying on the fourth floor.

Below us, everything was in chaos. Gangsters cursed loudly, and the man who had lost his eyes wailed piteously.

Just now there had been a lot of people and a lot of guns. Even if Ah Yi and I attacked with our kung fu, the three other men were too far away. It wasn't a sure thing that we could attack successfully from so far away. So we made a quick decision to jump back up towards the water tower.

Our minds shone with clarity: We could only fight at close quarters, if the distance between us and the gangsters was too great, our chances of getting shot down were also too great.

The only strategy which could ensure our success was to circle around and destroy them one or two at a time.

And so, we decided to fly back and forth from one floor to another, making one quick attack each floor.

Counting the roof we were standing on, the suburban villa had a total of five levels.

"Where are they?" Ah Yi snapped.

"Hold on." I closed my eyes and analyzed the changes in the auras of death in the building.

"Hurry up," said Ah Yi anxiously.

"Four of them came up to the fourth floor from the third," I said softly. "The three from just now are closing in on us." Looking at the metal door

next to the water tower, I pushed my mask up onto the top of my head and bit down on my tree-branch sword, the top of which dripped with fresh, red blood.

**

[144] Dapu township is in Chiayi county, which is south of Changhua.
<http://tinyurl.com/pd9du84>

Justice and the Law (6)

"Do we go back down to the fourth floor?" asked Ah Yi impatiently. "Or do we charge the third floor?"

"Neither," I said. "Just cover me." I bit down on the tree branch sword.

Sweat soaked through our thin T-shirts.

For the first time, I experienced the feeling of my life being at great risk.

For the first time, blood pumped through my veins so hard it shook my soul.

For the first time, I had to kill.

Or be killed.

Ah Yi and I stood next to the iron door, our auras of death fully awakened.

"Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!" Bullets shot through the door, and then three toughs kicked it open and burst through, fanning out left and right.

Or actually, I should say that they tried to fan out left and right.

"Bam!" My palms swirled, and the three toughs suddenly flew back down the stairs.

Dead.

In a moment like that when my life hung in the balance, I had no spirit for compassion, and in fact could not afford to risk offering it.

When I attack with full strength, the power is pretty much unbeatable.

"What now?" asked Ah Yi, visibly working hard to control himself.

"There are four auras of death on the fourth floor, five auras on the third floor, three on the second, and I think five on the first floor." My perception abilities grew along with my aura of death, to an uncanny height.

"Which floor do we go to?" asked Ah Yi. "Should we just attack the fatty's room on the third floor?"

"Let me think," I said. "Whatever we do, we're going to need to jump around."

"You don't need to think about it. We go to the third floor and take out one or two, then back to the fourth floor and take out one or two, then back to the third floor for another one or two! Then back here again." Underneath the mask, his expression was gradually growing colder and colder."

"Third, fourth, third, fifth?" I said.

"They'll never be able to predict this attack method," said with certainty.

That's right. The gunmen on the third floor would never expect that we would skip past the fourth floor attackers. And the guys on the fourth floor would be super confused, and would never expect us to come up from the third floor to attack them. Before the third floor gunmen could gather their wits, we would attack them again! And by the time the four floor guys were ready to shoot, we would be back on the roof.

Under such pressing circumstances, this was a good plan. In a couple moves we could take out most of the gunmen. The leftovers would be easy to take care of (in reality, it wasn't that easy).

"Ok, let's do it!" I said, slipping my mask back on and gripping my tree branch sword.

Two Jianghu heroes flipped down, landing on the fourth floor railing, and then flipped down again to the third floor.

"Shit!" The four gunmen on the fourth floor only saw two black shadows flicker past. They had no time to shoot.

But the third floor gunmen weren't as lucky. They didn't even have the chance to open their mouth to curse.

I kicked off the railing, my body low as I shot forward. My sword stabbed through one of the gunmen's Flying Dragon point. Bullets flew over my back, not fast enough to beat my sword. I twisted my body backwards, chopping my hand towards the groin of the guy shooting at me. He let out a horrible shriek. Another gunman slammed by Ah Yi's palm shot through the railing and fell down to the ground.

We were done with the third floor!

On to the fourth!

But luck was not with us! How could we have predicted what would happen next?

We had no way to flip back up to the fourth floor, because the remaining two gunmen had already opened fire!

A fateful moment!

Ah Yi's bizarre, shapeless sword technique combined with his strange stances worked well together. Even as the gunman shot, he rolled onto the ground, his sword shooting up and into his opponents jaw.

The other stream of fire slammed into the guy whose groin I'd chopped. My face felt warm as red blood splattered across it. I was so scared I was about to go crazy. I slapped the corpse with my palm, sending it flying toward the gunman. He dodged to the side, only to find his neck snapped... by Ah Yi's cunning sword.

The only thing left on the third floor were pools of blood and five twitching corpses.

The gunmen we could have anticipated.

But our reaction to the life and death situation could not have been.

We'd succeeded not because things went smoothly, but because we'd gambled with our lives.

And now our true purpose began—taking care of the evil fatty hiding in the room.

With my sword, I pushed open the iron door leading into the main hall.

The evil fatty hid beyond the main hall, trembling.

I could sense his teeth chattering as he mumbled quavering prayers to Buddha.

What good does it do for a vile creature like this to pray to Buddha?

He begged for mercy from the gods, over and over again.

This was really testing their patience.

Buddha looked down.

And glared with fury!

Ah Yi and I ducked into the main hall.

"Does he have a gun?" whispered Ah Yi, looking at the room which concealed the fatty.

I nodded. The fatty's aura of death barely flickered.

Originally, I had thought to just kick the door open. But then I had a strange feeling.

Ah Yi looked at me questioningly, and was about to say something when I gripped the door handle and slowly turned it. The door opened.

Ah Yi was a little surprised, but he followed my lead as I oh so carefully stuck my head out from behind the wall and looked into the bedroom.

There was a TV on the wall, filled with security camera feeds from all of the corridors.

But there was no one in the room.

Or at least, no one alive.

The body of a girl lay on the bed. Blood oozed out from a hole between

her eyes, soaking the bed sheet.

The reek of fresh gore filled the air.

It was so fresh it made me want to throw up.

Ah Yi actually did throw up.

As he vomited he looked at me questioningly.

The answer to the question was in the wardrobe on the side of the room.

Because of the security cameras, the fatty knew we'd taken out all the gunmen on the third floor. He killed the girl so she wouldn't reveal his location, trying to trick us into thinking he wasn't there.

That was why he'd left the door unlocked for Ah Yi and I.

But he didn't realized that nothing could escape agents of justice.

Justice and the Law (7)

The victim on the bed only made me feel more guilty and worthy of blame; I hated my hypocrisy.

If not for my cheap pity, this innocent woman might be at home tonight, quilting and giggling as she watched soap operas.

Before, I couldn't wrap my mind around the concept of taking a life and definitely didn't have the courage to commit such a crime. And because of that, I became the accomplice of this evil fatty.

I clenched my fists and stalked wrathfully toward the wardrobe.

Rustling sounds came from within; just like Pandora's box, it concealed something hideously ugly.

This was not for atonement.

This was not for revenge.

This was for justice.

"Bam!"

I crushed the wardrobe into the wall like a soft cardboard box.

The power of justice twisted it, crammed it, ground it, exploded it into a pulp.

No pitiful cry came from within.

Because neither the wardrobe, nor what it contained, were alive.

Inside the cupboard, what had once been a bad guy, was now a messy pulp.

And my cheap pity.

"Finally," said Ah Yi.

"Finally," I said.

"Ping! Ping!" The sound of gunfire came from outside.

The lock on the main hall's outer door was shot to pieces by bullets. Ah Yi and I stared dumbly.

Two armed killers kicked the door in, so Ah Yi and I hastily closed the wooden bedroom door. Suddenly, a stream of bullets smashed through it; wood shavings, sparks and smoke filled the air. The two of us cowered in fear on either side of the door.

It looked bad. We were so focused on killing the fat pig that we'd

forgotten about the gunmen on the fourth, second and first floors!

And now we were trapped in the room, surrounded by a pack of rabid killers.

"****! Come out!"

"**** your mothers!"

The killers howled crazily, presumably because they'd surmised their boss's grim circumstances.

Accompanying their cries were bursts of explosive gunfire.

Ah Yi and I covered our ears and screamed in fear.

The wood door had been blown almost completely to bits, and there was almost nothing left but a gaping, smoking hole.

"Get outta there! Get outta there!" the killers shouted furiously.

The sound of the bullets and the exploding door had sent my mind into chaos.

No! Ah Yi and I couldn't die here!

Bullets flew through the hole of a door, obliterating everything in the

room, and forcing our sense of terror higher and higher.

I needed to remain calm.

"How many are out there?" yelled Ah Yi.

Covering my ears, I shouted, "Nine!"

Ah Yi looked at me. "I'll cover you!"

My heart trembled.

Holding his head in his hands, Ah Yi yelled, "I'm sure! I'm sure I can take out five or six. I promise!"

I said nothing.

He continued to shout, "Don't look back, don't fight! You can get through the rest of them, maybe three or four."

I said nothing.

The bullets flew, destroying everything in the room that could be destroyed.

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

"Trust me!" called Ah Yi. "In five seconds, we go out together."

I laughed. "Your sword technique sucks!" I yelled. "I'm gonna get killed!"

"**** your mother!" he yelled back. "I won't even let them point their guns at you."

I stood up, gripping my tree branch sword. "You're full of crap!" I yelled. "My sword technique has always been more powerful than yours! I can take out nine of them! Not one less. I'll cover you!"

Ah Yi laughed.

We didn't need to say anything more.

Neither of us would cover the other.

And neither of us needed to be covered.

Because, we were no longer afraid of death.

"Actually, we already won tonight!" Ah Yi said with a laugh.

I laughed too. "In the end, we got to be heroes for one night!"

What remained of the wooden door collapsed to the ground, unable to remain standing. The sound of gunfire remained as ceaseless as before.

"See you in the afterlife of heroes!" yelled Ah Yi.

"In the afterlife of heroes!" I yelled back. I grabbed my mask and smashed it up.

Our eyes met, and we knew that our devotion to each other was complete.

Two heroes charged forth.

This would be the Yi Jing Sword's magnificent debut in Jianghu.

And perhaps its last.

So, I must use it to its utmost extent, win fame in the whole world.

The whole world, nothing less would do.

And yet when it came down to it, I couldn't actually use my sword.

And neither could Ah Yi.

We stood mutely in the doorway, staring at the gunmen as they gasped out piteous wails.

There in the middle of the main hall was a moldy green color.

An old hero wearing a Tang suit.

It was Master!

Master, more powerful than a spirit!

"Palms are faster than guns, Qi is faster than bullets," said Master coolly.
"It is a general principle."

He suddenly extended his hand, and a powerful Qi sword stabbed down toward one of the gunmen laying on the ground.

His forehead split open, and the gun in his hand slowly slid to the ground. His attempted sneak attack had failed miserably.

"In this period of time, when you cannot yield Qi swords," said Master apologetically, "Perhaps you should study how to use hidden projectile weapons, even though I personally can't."

As for when exactly Master had arrived, and how exactly he'd attacked, Ah Yi and I had no idea.

Regardless, we couldn't even speak. But our hearts surged with emotion.

The exact feeling is hard to describe.

Craning his neck, Master looked into the room and said, "The work of you two?"

I nodded. "Master," I cried, "I was wrong! I shouldn't have ..."

Master shook his head. "You have your own concept of justice. No matter what happens, Master will always be pleased with you."

I couldn't hold back my tears. "Master, thank you so much for saving us!" I said.

He let out a silly laugh. "You two were emitting such powerful auras of death, even if I didn't want to come, it would have been difficult."

Justice and the Law (8)

Ah Yi let out a relieved sigh and sat on the ground. "So dangerous! We almost died!"

"Let's go erase the video cassettes in the bedroom!" I said hurriedly, "and then get out of here! With this much gunfire, the police are definitely gonna be here any second!"

Ah Yi and I had just taken off our masks, so we along with Master walked into the bedroom and destroyed each cassette, one by one. And then I suddenly let out a shout of regret, "We just about died for nothing!"

Ah Yi stared at me. "What do you mean?" he asked.

I pointed at the cement bedroom wall which faced the hillside. Ah Yi immediately blurted out, "Mother****er! We're so stupid!"

Master burst out laughing and took a step forward. He placed his palm up against the bullet-filled wall and "bammed" a giant hole. The three of us jumped out and flew down the steep hill.

"Bammed" a hole straight through the law and slipped away.

This was my and Ah Yi's virgin battle, and definitely the most soul-stirring one in my life.

When one's hormones have been completely used up, one's belly will surely be ravenously empty.

"The first time killing," I sighed. I felt really hollow at heart.

"The first time killing bad guys," added Ah Yi. "I'm worried about getting addicted to it."

Master stared at him. "To be addicted to killing, you must first master extremely powerful martial arts!"

It was super late, and only a few vendors were left on the street. I picked a spot, and ordered six plates of oyster omelets, three plates of seafood fried noodles, five saucers of stir-fried appetizers, three bowls of Four Gods soup, and three bowls of pork blood soup. [145]

Ah Yi and I were ridiculously hungry, so we just starting gobbling things up. Master started eating too.

It seemed a little bit ironic to be wolfing down a meal this late at night, after killing.

But, one can only eat in this way with a clear conscience.

The reek of blood had been left far behind, and in front of us was an abundance of steaming, delicious food.

"Heroes have no regrets!" laughed Master. "We laugh and drink the

blood of the Xiongnu[146], eat the flesh of the foreigners! This is the spirit of Grandpa Yue [147]. For the country and for the people! True heroes!"

What Master said was true.

His mouth full of oysters, he continued, "However, even though Grandpa Yue is a hero of the ages, if you compare the torment in our hearts to his, he really pales into insignificance."

"What do you mean?" I asked curiously.

Master ladled his mouth full of pork blood soup and then mumbled, "Grandpa Yue killed tens of thousands of Xiongnu, and never even thought twice about it. That is because it was in the service of the royal court, to fight for the people and the country. He had no choice but to achieve victory, reclaim conquered lands and rescue the Son of Heaven. He never thought about the fact that the non-Han people are also people, too. They have fathers and mothers, wives and children. His end was tragic, but he became a hero and died with no regrets."

This was interesting.

Randomly stuffing things into my mouth, I said, "I guess I understand. When we kill people, we are actually breaking the laws of the country, handing out the death penalty on our own accord. Therefore, our consciences might be troubled. But Yue Fei was acting on orders from the country itself, and so his conscience was clear."

Master thought for a moment, then shook his head. "You are half right.

It is not a matter of a troubled conscience, it is a matter of choices."

Ah Yi had no time to join the debate as he was completely focused on stuffing his face.

Master continued, "Grandpa Yue killed the foreigners with his powerful army. He had no choice, because he was the General of Generals, and was backed by the law of the country. In the end, he was sent the twelve golden plaques, and then ordered back to the capital and killed. But if his heart was filled with pure, shining justice, he could escape the sin of disobeying orders, as well as the ostracism of the world, and bravely lead the army into battle. In this way, tens of millions of Han Chinese escaped death and slavery at the hands of the foreigners."

Slurping down the pig blood soup as if it were alcohol, Master laughed, "Now that I think about it, Grandpa Yue did not have to do much to be a hero. Then he just died and achieved immortal fame."

When put this way, it seemed as if Grandpa Yue wasn't very heroic after all.

He picked the law, and didn't have to consider the common people. And then he died.

"As for us," I went on, "we have to carefully judge whether someone deserves to be killed. We're basically constantly breaking the law. Considering whether or not to give the bad guys a chance to change really is torture. I'm starting to feel a lot of pressure."

Ah Yi suddenly cut in: "Why aren't the people who execute criminals the family members of the victims? They want the bad guys dead, but they don't have to do anything! The people who actually kill the death-row inmates are the executioners, and they get paid to do it. They don't have to consider anything. It's their job. No choices to be made. Bang, bang, and it's over."

"Call them bailiffs," I couldn't help but say. "Executioner sounds so bad."

"Whatever. They kill people just the same. Soldiers and police both can just say they are following orders."

Yeah, placing the responsibility of killing people onto the system, makes the system seem to be the embodiment of justice. Justice shoots forth with a light pull on a trigger, and has nothing to do with the individual.

The system is truly like a mountain of justice that can be called upon for support.

As for us master and disciples, we did not have a mountain of systemized justice to call upon when we acted, but just a vague concept.

Vague, but hot blooded.

An authentic, living justice.

But vague enough to leave one uneasy.

No one, not even Master himself, could tell me who is worthy to be put to death, and who is worthy to be let off with a warning. The responsibility of killing lay on my own shoulders, so I must act accordingly.

Being a hero who carries out justice truly necessitates a life filled with uncertainties and fear.

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[145] Oyster omelets are a famous Taiwan specialty.
<http://tinyurl.com/yebj4q6>. Four Gods soup or sishen soup is some kind of Taiwanese soup. The only article I could find is blocked in China and I don't have a VPN at the moment, so hopefully the link is good.
<http://tinyurl.com/ohn3vx4>

[146] The Xiongnu were a nomadic people who lived in what is now Mongolia, who fought with the Han Chinese a lot. They are sometimes (probably erroneously) referred to as Huns. The term eventually also came to encompass any of the northern nomadic groups who fought with China. <http://tinyurl.com/cjlenmz>

[147] He is referring to Yue Fei, one of the most popular and famous folk heroes in Chinese culture. He is known most for fighting against the foreign-controlled Jin dynasty. <http://tinyurl.com/yjbnud4>

The reality of a twisted contradiction (1)

Just as the three of us were vying for the last bowl of Four Gods soup, Ah Yi suddenly shouted, "****! The TV!"

Even the vendor was startled by his outburst, and turned to look at us with a strange expression. Then he turned his head toward the television sitting on top of his vendor cart, and then looked back at Master.

On the television was a woman holding a photo and crying. The camera zoomed in on the photo.

In the photo, the woman sat in a pavilion in a park with an old man. The old man's face was filled with a perplexed expression. He wore a green Tang suit.

The old man was absolutely, without a doubt, Master!

Master looked stunned.

The woman cried into the camera: "...so please, good-hearted people, please help me. My father has not been right in the head in the past few years. He hasn't been home for such a long time, I don't know where he is, please..."

Master slammed down his bowl and howled, "**** your grandmother! Who is not right in the head?!"

Ah Yi and I started. The woman on the television continued to cry, and a phone number and an address appeared at the bottom of the screen. Presumably, it was the phone number and address of Master's family.

Master, his face red, pointed at the television and let loose a torrent of curses, "You crazy woman, you took over my house! Then you accuse me of being your dad! **** your ancestors! You just cursed me all day long! You forced me to run away and hide!"

I looked at Ah Yi, and he looked back, as embarrassed as me.

The vendor quickly turned off the television, but Master wasn't done cursing. "You two brats are coming with me to Yuanlin [148] tomorrow!" he yelled. "We will get rid of that crazy woman! For justice!"

Ah Yi and I agreed subserviently. Ai, who knew who this woman was, but she sure had struck bad luck to get Master to want to kill her.

Master clenched his fists and howled, "Stinking *****! Your death approaches, tomorrow!"

I quickly paid our tab and, with Ah Yi's help, dragged Master away. He was like a little kid throwing a temper tantrum.

We skipped class.

Not to practice martial arts, not to engage in acts of chivalry, but to go to Yuanlin.

Go to Yuanlin with the purpose of killing Master's unlucky daughter.

The three of us took the bus (originally Master wanted to hop the electricity poles all the way there, but Ah Yi and I adamantly opposed). The whole way, we didn't talk or laugh, and didn't talk about how we felt.

As for whether or not the woman really was Master's daughter, I was on the fence.

I was suspicious, especially because of Madam Hua Mao'er [149], from 300 years ago. Master had loved her so much. When Ah Yi and I practiced martial arts, he would often sing her strange folk songs. After she died, I can't imagine that he would marry again, let alone have a daughter.

Furthermore, Master had crawled out of the Qin Imperial Mausoleum only a handful of years ago. How could he have a daughter who appeared to be the same age as my mom?

Although, what if she was Master's adopted daughter? That would be a different matter altogether.

Perhaps Master's memory wasn't very good (well, not perhaps, he definitely was very forgetful). Maybe he had just forgotten about her. Or maybe he had just had a big fight with his adopted daughter, then run away from home in a fit of rage, and now was just hesitant to admit it in front of Ah Yi and I.

What did Ah Yi think?

"It's his deal," he'd said. "If Master wants to kill someone, then so be it. I can't do anything about it even if I wanted to."

And so the three of us got off the bus, Ah Yi and I and Master, who was still in a rage. We followed him as he hurried into a run-down alley.

It was a very traditional alley, typically traditional.

As for where exactly we were in Yuanlin, it doesn't really matter. These kinds of alleys can be found crawling all over Taiwan. It truly carried the spirit of humanity, and brimmed with an ancient feeling of life.

"Oh, God!" said an old housewife carrying a basket of vegetables. "It's that old lunatic!" She stared for a moment, then turned to start spreading the news.

"Wah!" said an old man sitting in front of his door fanning himself. "The Guan family's old geezer is back!"

"Hooo—Crazy Gramps—wahh—" The kid started crying and actually fell down.

"The late night news yesterday..." The two nosy-looking women's conversation descended into whispers.

"It's that old crazy guy named Guan..." said a guy smoking Fulushou cigarettes. [150]

Master's face grew more and more dark. I simply didn't dare to even look at him.

Would he actually kill this woman professing to be his daughter? I clung to my intention to stop him. That was why I had come with Ah Yi here to Yuanlin.

Master's mood was incredibly horrible. His aura of death surged, and then was just as quickly suppressed.

Could I prevent Master from killing someone who shouldn't be killed?

I glanced at Ah Yi. He looked pale.

"Master," I said, "You aren't really going to kill that..."

"Damn right I am!" He let off a string of curses.

"But," I said, "her crimes don't..."

"Her crimes do not deserve death? They do!" Master's aura of death crackled like exploding popcorn.

This was disastrous.

If things kept going this way, maybe I should make a sneak attack on

Master, give him a chance to clear his head.

"It is right here!" Master pointed to an old, three story building. He pounded on the door.

Of course, Master could smash it to pieces with a single palm, but he still "bang bang bang," knocked on the door.

I gave Ah Yi a meaningful glance, then eyed the back of Master's head and his back.

Ah Yi nodded.

Good. If the woman opened the door, I would attack Master's lower back with a palm strike, and Ah Yi, with his less powerful palm, would go for the back of his head. We would knock him out and let him calm down.

Then, the door opened.

Our palms shot forth!

But then, Master suddenly shot backward two paces, completely avoiding our palms.

Our ears burned, and we didn't really know what to do. Master's face filled with confusion. But, he wasn't paying attention to the two disciples who had just attempted a sneak attack.

[148] I believe I mentioned in a previous footnote that Yuanlin is a city neighboring Changhua city.

[149] He refers to her with the title 师母 shi mu, which is a form of address for your teacher's wife.

[150] Fulushou is a Chinese cigarette brand. Couldn't find any articles or an official translation of the name. <http://tinyurl.com/myrtbln>

The reality of a twisted contradiction (2)

Not only did Master's face fill with confusion, his body seemed to expand, and his aura of death flared, and then suddenly disappeared.

He was like a crazy egg that suddenly expanded, and then cracked, the insides seeping out.

Even the all-important yolk disappeared.

Everything disappeared, leaving behind only a fragile eggshell.

It seemed that not only had Master's aura of death disappeared, so had his soul.

He stood there, mouth agape, staring at the woman who had professed to be his daughter.

The woman's eyes filled with tears, and she shouted, "Dad!"

Master's body began to quake.

The woman walked over and grabbed him. "Dad! Where have you been?"

Master was struck speechless. He could only stand there and mumble strangely, "Uh, uh."

Ah Yi and I gaped, and just as we were about to try to pull Master back, the woman caught sight of us. "You brought my father back home?" she said appreciatively. "Please, come in!"

With that, she pulled our zombie-like Master inside along with us.

The house wasn't small, and even though it was old, it was very clean.

The woman poured us cups of tea and said, "Thank you two so much. Where did you find my father?"

Ah Yi hemmed and hawed, until I blurted, "A few days ago ... near our school, it's near Ba Gua mountain, we kept seeing this old gentleman... then, then last night we saw ..."

And then Master, who had up to this point been sitting motionless on a char, suddenly murmured, "****! Why are you saying that you are my daughter?"

I gaped at Master as his spirit began to rise again. "Dammit!" he said angrily. "You take over my place, and then you talk rubbish like this! Ah Yi! Fell her for me!"

A look of complete hopelessness filled the woman's face. "He must have told you that he came from the Ming Dynasty, three hundred years ago. Right?"

Ah Yi and I were completely embarrassed. "Yes," we said.

She sighed. "He's been sick like this for years now. Sometimes he just runs away, saying he needs to find disciples to teach martial arts to. We haven't seen a trace of him for nearly two and a half years! A while back he said he went to Japan. Ai. He doesn't even have a passport or money. How could he get there?"

"Master made a boat," Ah Yi suddenly blurted out. "When it flipped over, he walked on the seafloor."

The woman gave Ah Yi a strange look, so I quickly changed the topic. "This old gentleman is really your father?"

Master sat to the side gnashing his teeth, slowly sinking into the chair, forming a true contradiction.

Not waiting for the woman to reply to my question, Master angrily said, "I already gave you my place, is that not enough? Why do you have to say I am not right in the head! You bastards called me crazy all the time, I had no chance even to do training. There's no need to be so fake and call me dad!"

The woman looked at Master compassionately and put a cup of tea in front of him. "Dad," she said, "Kai Han bought this house years ago. You weren't living in Taipei any more, and you didn't want to live at the rest home, so you came here to live with us."

"Who is this Kai Han!" shrieked Master. "I do not know any Kai Han!"

Wiping the tears from her eyes, she said, "Kai Han is your son-in-law. My husband!"

Master's face filled with disdain. The woman reached into the drawer of a nearby wooden desk and pulled out some photo albums. "Dad, take a look. These are pictures of us all together. Did you forget again?"

Master looked at one of the photos. "Forgot? I remember quite clearly. You are trying to deceive me again!" he howled crazily. "You want to trick me! There is no such thing as what you are saying!"

Ah Yi and I took the photo albums and started flipping through them. They were filled with pictures of Master's "family." Photo after photo of a happy family, and in each one was Master, smiling happily, wearing Tang suits, shirts, western-style suits, white undershirts, and more. None of them were like his current moldy old green Tang suit.

His hair was not as gray as it was now; there was much more black in it. In most of the pictures, there was an older woman at his side, and his so-called daughter (a younger version, of course). He was usually situated between the two of them.

But what was strange was the dates on the pictures.

Many of the dates in the lower right corner were from before 1974.

This was really weird.

According to what Master had said, he climbed out of the Qin Imperial Mausoleum in 1974 to once again see the light of day.

But some of these pictures were taken in the 50's and 60's, and Master was clearly many years younger and glowing with health. In one picture, the young version of the woman was wearing a graduation robe and clutching Master's arm!

Seeing the expressions on our faces, Master shouted angrily, "You two sons of *****es! You still have not gotten ridden of this evil! Right this wrong, according to heaven's decree!"

I looked at master apologetically.

"My dad came over from the mainland with the Nationalist Government," said the woman. "He married my mom here in Taiwan and worked in the Household Registration Department. At first everything was great."

"But," she continued pathetically, "after mom died, he was so sad, and something just went wrong. Even though he came to live with us for a while, his health just got worse and worse. My husband and I were so busy with our business, so as I think about it now, it was really our fault. Ai... we sent dad to live temporarily at a rest home in Taipei. We never imagined that after only a few months he would start losing his mind. He started saying that he was some kind of martial arts hero from ancient times. He ran away from the rest home and came back here."

I simply couldn't interrupt. The woman continued, "At first, I thought he was suffering from dementia and just being unreasonable. He said we

had taken over his house, and that he didn't believe that I was his daughter. I got really upset and we had a fight, and then he just left."

She looked sadly at Master. "Dad would come back occasionally and stand at the door for a while, but as soon as I would step out to receive him, he would run away. If I managed to drag him inside, he would stay a few days and then run off again without a trace."

"Bullcrap!" cried Master. "Bullcrap! Bullcrap!"

The woman looked at him, tears once again streaming down her face. "Dad," she said, "for two years I had no idea where you were. You didn't come back even once! I was so worried. Kai Han is also so sorry that he got mad at you, dad. And your two grandchildren miss you so much, don't you know? When they get back from school you can see them!"

The reality of a twisted contradiction (3)

Master stared mutely at the woman's tears, and then shrank back into the chair like a deflated rubber ball.

Right now, two stories fought back and forth relentlessly in my head.

One was Master's extraordinary tale, which was simply unbelievable.

But Master was Master. His martial arts were not fake. And Lan Jin had come after him!

The other story was the weeping woman's tearful story, along with photographic evidence.

The photos were definitely not fake, and many of the pictures of the happy family of three were taken when Master should have been buried in the earth.

The two stories just did not fit together like the gears that they should. Instead, they were like two cumbersome, speeding dump trucks smashing up against each other.

I couldn't help but ask, "When did Master, I mean, the old gentleman run away from the rest home?"

Master closed his eyes, and based on the Qi flow I could sense emanating from his body, I knew that he was not pleased at all with my

question.

The woman thought for a moment, slowly counting on her fingers. "Nine years ago," she said. "Almost ten."

It was now 1988. Cut off nine years and that would make it 1979. That was still a five years difference from when he was supposed to have emerged from the soil.

It was just too strange. I borrowed a pen from the woman and wrote down some key dates on a piece of paper. I thought for a while and then suddenly said, "Master! I forgot how many years you said it was from the time you climbed out of the earth until you left the mainland and crossed the sea to Taiwan."

Master's eyes were still closed and it seemed as if he were ignoring me. He simply held up his hand to indicate "5."

If you add 5 years to 1974, that would be exactly 1979!

Analyzing the two stories a bit revealed: The year that Master left the rest home proclaiming that he was an ancient hero, was the same year that Master left mainland China and crossed the sea to Taiwan. Before that point, the two stories were at complete odds, and just didn't line up (one person in Taiwan, one person in mainland China). But after that point, the two stories converged together.

"Master," asked Ah Yi, "If you were in mainland China for those five years, how could you know about this ... this place here in Yuanlin?"

That was a really good question!

Master didn't respond to the question. He only made a "humph."

It was as if the question wasn't important.

I really couldn't take Master's passive-aggressive attitude. "Master," I asked him again, "Ah Yi asked you how you knew about this place."

"This was the first place I stayed at when I came to Taiwan," Master said coldly. "This woman is talking all kinds of rubbish. Bunk! Rubbish! Lies! Completely unbelievable!"

Master seemed to me to be acting like a hysterical child.

The woman let loose another sigh.

From the moment we had entered, she had sighed. A lot.

Anyone would sigh a lot under these kind of circumstances.

She stood up, walked toward the bookshelf and pulled out a big, old-fashioned book. Brushing the dust off its surface, she handed it to Master. Master glanced at it and then angrily said. "What is this? Go away!"

The woman opened the album to a page marked by a bookmark. "Dad,

this is the Office of Household Registration employee contact directory. Take a look, this is you."

He glanced at the directory and said, "That does not even look like me!"

She handed the directory to Ah Yi and I. We looked at it obediently and, how could he say it didn't look like him? It was completely obvious that it was him!

But then, more strangeness!

Underneath the picture of young Master, the name was not what he had called himself, "Huang Jun," but instead "Guan Yanhe." [151]

There is a big difference between the surname Huang and the surname Guan.

Could would of them be fake? Or were they both real?

This was really bizarre. Luckily, the issue of the names wasn't really a big deal when you compared it to the whole issue at hand.

But when you add all these problems together, it was like a cup with all kinds of different alcohol just randomly mixed together: really hard to swallow.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

The woman asked us to remain seated while she left for the entryway. And then a ruddy-faced old man rushed in and shouted, "Good old Guan. You're back! My neighbor told me, so I rushed over to see you!"

Master couldn't help but open his eyes. "Good old who? I don't know you."

The old man laughed. "Good old Guan! You really forgot? No wonder you ran off without a trace for the last two years."

The women explained: "This gentleman is dad's old hometown friend. They came over with the Nationalist Government and worked together in the Office of Household Registration. Then when dad moved over here to live with us, he moved as well. He's my dad's sworn brother."

When Master he heard that, he flipped out again and said, "Dammit!"

The old man grabbed Master, who was still sunken into the chair, and enthusiastically said, "Guan! Have Mei cook up some food, and us two can have a pot of good alcohol!" [152]

Master stared at him, but he went on jovially, "When you first went to live at that damned rest home, I moved in with you for a few months, because I was afraid you would be bored out of your mind! I never imagined you'd pretend to go crazy and then disappear into freedom for all these years!"

Another point of doubt entered my head. Nervously, I asked, "Master, do you remember the rest home?"

“How could I forget?” he said loudly. “I walked on the seafloor for so long my mind started to get foggy. I was so tired I decided to just let the tide carry me. Rest a bit and just hold my breath for as long as I could. Eventually I washed up on the shore and slipped into a coma. When I woke up, I was lying on a bed in that damned so-called rest home.”

The more he talked the more agitated he became. “That damned rest home! Everyone there said I was crazy. **** your mothers! Were it not for the fact that I do not kill innocent people, that place would have been a pile of corpses!”

The old man who said he was Master’s best friend immediately started to try to calm him down. “It’s okay, It’s okay. Guan, just rest a bit, everything will be okay!”

“Who is this Guan you speak of!” Master roared. “I grew up in the Huang Clan village. My family name is Huang!” With that, Master stretched out his hand and jabbed the old man’s “ding dong point” and “speechless point,” sealing his Qi and blood. He could neither move nor speak.

The uncertainty in my heart was piling up, and I was getting more and more perturbed. Ah Yi lowered his head, his face contorted as if in pain.

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[151] His name is 关砚河 guān yàn hé. Guan is a common family name. Yan means inkstone and He means river.

[152] This guy is definitely speaking mainland style mandarin and not Taiwan style mandarin.

The reality of twisted contradiction (4)

Suddenly, I had flash of inspiration.

"Master, I'll help you kill her!" I shouted, pointing at the woman.

"Quickly!" Master roared. "Show no mercy! This crazy woman is driving me to my death!"

The woman looked at me in shock as I leaped out of the chair, my aura of death exploding around me. My palm flew toward her chest!

"Bam!"

All the power of my attack, a surging tempest, was sucked away, as if it had been absorbed by a sea of cotton.

The sea of cotton was a person.

Just as I had guessed, it was a panic-stricken Master.

His palm had instantly met mine, swallowing up all of my power. Master, his forehead steaming, took two steps back and released the energy into the air with his other hand.

I had attacked with all my strength, so if Master had completely blocked me, I would have suffered serious internal injuries. By accepting

the blow, even with his deep inner force, he was also forced to accept some minor injury.

In order to test out Master's true feelings for this woman, I had decided to take a bit of a risk. If Master didn't block me, I could direct the force of my blow into the wall behind the woman. If he did block me, it would prove that deep in his heart, he did have feelings.

And he had blocked me.

"Let's go," said Master, coughing and waving his hand. "It's not good to stay in this place for too long."

I watched him as he coughed. "Master, is she really not your daughter? If not, why did you prevent me from killing her?"

He didn't answer. He grabbed me with one hand and Ah Yi with the other, then rushed out of the suffocating house, leaving behind the dumbstruck woman who claimed to be his daughter.

Master looked straight ahead as he led us through the twisting alleys. When we emerged, he finally released us and let out a few coughs. "Master is not willing to let you mercilessly kill an innocent person."

And so Yuanlin became a place full of question marks.

What feeling does one have when facing a killer?

Perhaps hate, and some fear.

And yet, if the killer is the person you love, then the feeling is something impossible to describe in just a few words.

Especially if the killer plans to continue with his crimes. That feeling would become even more complex.

So Yi Jing's feelings now were quite complex.

"You're a third year middle-school student," she said in a depressed tone.

"You are one of Master's disciples, too. You understand." I lowered my head.

We sat in the bleachers watching Ah Lun, Ah Yi and some others playing basketball.

All Ah Yi had to do was get his hands on the ball and then dunk it. He'd already dunked seventeen balls this game.

"But you're a third year middle school student," she repeated. Contradictory feelings filled her Qi flow.

"Heroes are not categorized by age. You are one of Master's disciples, too. You understand."

"What does it feel like to kill?" With a sigh, Yi Jing went on: "Actually, I don't really want to know, but it's not some random person, it's you. I have no choice but to know."

I squeezed her hand. "Nobody should have the power to decide who lives and dies."

She looked me in the eyes. "If you really think that, why do you kill people? In your heart, you should know, our world and Master's wuxia world are totally different. Totally different!"

"Because nobody has the power to decide who lives and dies," I continued, "bastards who end other's lives cannot be allowed to continue on in this world."

Yi Jing's hand gripped mine so hard that it hurt. "I know that sometimes you have to curb violence with violence. But is it really necessary to kill people?"

I nodded. "It's necessary."

Sounding somewhat upset, she said, "But ending a life is ending a life. Doesn't that make you the same as those bastards?"

I shook my head. "It's not the same. Those bastards end their own lives, it's just carried out by the hand of the heroes."

"But when you kill, aren't you the same as them?"

The same as the bastards.

I laughed.

She stared at me for a moment, and then she also laughed.

She knew that a hero who had killed people but could still sit next to their loved one like this, must have a clear heart.

And they could laugh.

It was truly consoling.

Ah Yi knocked the ball out of the hand of a tall player, and the crowd hissed.

"Actually," said Yi Jing softly, "I'm mostly worried that you will feel unease at heart."

I understood. I also feared that my clear heart was faked.

But deep down, I knew that as long as I had Yi Jing at my side, I would never be a murderous killer, but a hero. A happy, laughing hero.

"I'm also worried you'll like it," she said, lowering her head.

When I heard this sentence, so soft, my heart lurched a bit.

"Before I sleep, it's hard not to think about a lot of things," I said, "and that's when I feel a bit low." I looked at Yi Jing's dark, flowing hair.

"So what's to be done?"

"I'll get used to it."

"Killing people is not something you should have to get used to," she said pensively.

"What I mean is, the feeling I get after killing is something that I will get used to," I explained.

"That's even worse. I know you feel your heart is clear and without burden, but..." Yi Jing looked at me sincerely. "You should feel a little bad after killing people."

I thought I understood. "I get what you mean now," I said.

"From now on," she said resolutely, "if you kill someone, you have to tell me. Even if I get a bit angry, you still have to tell me."

"I know." And I really did know.

The evening sun slowly sank on the basketball court, and its continued

scene of tasteless dunking.

Ah Yi suddenly snatched the ball from Ah Lun. It was as if they weren't friends at all.

The reality of a twisted contradiction (5)

"Hey, in a bit, why don't we go practice some sword techniques, and then go home?" I said. What a weird kind of date.

"I can't. You don't want to keep going to school, but I'm different. My mom helped me find a new tutor. Today is our first class, at 7. Why don't you come? We can practice sword techniques after." She looked at her watch.

"Oh. Nah, sounds boring. Heroes don't need to study."

Yi Jing laughed. "Today I'm studying English. If the hero wants to kill foreign bad guys, he will have to be able to understand English."

I harrumphed. "When heroes need to kill foreign devils, they just kill them without even thinking about it. What's the point in understanding English?"

A sad look filled her face. "The hero doesn't care about the heroine's future."

Yi Jing was interested in foreign culture. In the future maybe she would study at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages [153] in the south. As for after that, even Yi Jing had no clue. Maybe she would turn out to be a well educated heroine.

If Yi Jing went to study at Wenzao, our simple but ever victorious

Heaven Reaching sect could move to the enchanting south, and there engage in acts of chivalry.

I shouldered my backpack. "You go to your class," I said. "It's a good thing. I want to head to Yuanlin again."

Yi Jing also put on her backpack. "Why do you have to go to Yuanlin again?"

I frowned. "I want to know who Master really is, and what really happened. I want to help him."

"You have to," she said. "Unlike some other person who just bullies the weak by dunking over them all the time."

Ah Yi didn't hear. He was focused on grabbing the bouncing ball, regardless of whose hands it was in.

So, I walked Yi Jing down the mountain and then hopped on the bus, heading toward Yuanlin amidst the fading twilight.

Master's "home" was hidden amidst the twisted alleys, and even though I'd been there once, I had to wander around for quite a while before I found it.

I stood at the door, listening to the sounds emanating from within; laughter, television, chopsticks. It seemed it was dinner time. I stood there blankly for a while until the sound of chopsticks ceased and was replaced by the sounds of bowls and plates being stacked up. Finally, I

rang the doorbell.

The door opened, and there stood a boy wearing an elementary school uniform.

"I'm looking for your mother, can I come in?" I said with a smile.

"Mom!" the boy yelled over his shoulder. "There's someone here for you!"

The sound of cleaning stopped, and "Master's daughter" came out from the kitchen. When she caught sight of me, she quickly dried her hands and called for me to come into the living room.

Even though deep in my heart I already firmly believed that she really was "Master's daughter," and that the pictures in the photo albums were 100% genuine, I will continue to call her "woman." In 1988 I had no concept of the idea of computer generated images.

The woman introduced the family to me. The man eating sunflower seeds was her husband and the two kids staring at the TV were her son and daughter. One was in third grade, the other in fourth.

"Is my father with you over there? Does he have a place to sleep? Is he eating well?" The woman's eyes were filled with tears, but her husband seemed irritated.

I nodded. "Your father is doing well," I said sincerely. "He's staying at my house, and he's healthier than ever."

She hurriedly grabbed a wallet out of the drawer, pulled out five one-thousand yuan bills, and stuffed them into my hand. "Please take care of father," she said. "He has a bad temper. And try to encourage him to come home. Tell him not to worry me so much, I really need him."

I couldn't accept the money. After all, of the three things I lacked the least in the world, one of them was money.

"The reason I came today is because I want to ask some more questions about your dad. I really can't figure out what is going on." I stuffed the money back into the woman's hand.

She asked me to sit, and poured me a cup of tea. "What would you like to ask? Don't tell me dad did something strange again."

Something strange? Master constantly did strange things. Where to begin?

But, there was something truly strange. I suddenly remembered how Master had been wounded by Lan Jin in the Qin Mausoleum. The wound was absolutely real.

"Did your dad ever talk about the wound on his hand? Do you remember anything about it?"

She didn't hesitate for even a moment. "Of course I remember. Two small, round scars. He's had them ever since I was born. He got them when he was fighting in the War of Resistance against Japan in the

mainland."

That was quite a different story from Master's, but I was mentally prepared for such an answer, and wasn't very surprised. I immediately responded, "How did he receive the wound? Was he stabbed? Shot?"

"Dad said that some stone fragments caused by an exploding grenade shot into his hand and almost crippled him."

I nodded. "So that's what happened." As before, confusion filled my heart.

"We really shouldn't have sent him to that rest home," she said sadly. "All it did was give him dementia."

Her husband suddenly jumped into the conversation, "What good does it do to talk about that now?" he said with annoyance. "If he comes back, all he'll do is talk crazy all day."

The woman lowered her head silently.

I took an awkward sip of tea and then quietly said, "Did your dad ... did he ever study any traditional martial arts? He really likes to talk about those kinds of things."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. But dad never studied anything like that, and never even seemed interested in it at all. It was after he lost his memories that he became completely wrapped up in a new world of his own creation."

As carefully as possible, I asked, "Did you ever consider that your dad could actually do martial arts?"

"I never thought about it," she said.

I laughed. "I'm pretty sure your dad sealed his old friend's pressure point the other day, and immobilized him. Right?"

The woman sighed. "Uncle Li got so mad because of everything that he had a stroke. I took him to the emergency room, and thankfully, after he rested a while, he got better. Thankfully he wasn't literally angered to death by dad."

I wanted to go find out whether Master's supposed old friend and fellow villager had really suffered from a stroke, or instead had had his blood vessels temporarily sealed. But it was too much trouble, just too much.

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[153] Wenzao Ursuline is the premiere language school in Taiwan
<http://tinyurl.com/pyyd4gq>

The reality of a twisted contradiction (6)

"Your dad really can't do kung fu?" I asked earnestly.

Her response was resolute: "Dad's health has always been poor."

I picked up the cup and handed it to the woman to look at. The tea in the cup was not just hot, it was boiling, boiling so hard it popped and bubbled.

She was shocked. "What is this?"

"This is what your dad taught me," I said quietly. "His abilities are even more powerful."

The woman didn't seem to want to believe. "What did you put into the tea?"

"Qigong," I said. [154]

She looked a little annoyed. "Qigong?"

"Your dad is a Qigong master." That sounded a lot more normal than saying he was 'the greatest expert in the martial world.'

The woman looked like she wanted to respond, but her face was covered with an expression that read, "What do I say now?"

I decided to change the topic: "Did you ever hear the old gentleman who had the stroke talk about anything else that happened in the old person's rest home?" Perhaps one of the side effects of Master's 300-year slumber was that he'd forgotten a lot of things.

The woman shook her head, but then looked as if she'd remembered something. I said, "Even some unrelated trivia or random fragments, just tell me. I think that something happened in the rest home that caused your dad to change like this."

Right then, the man chomping on sunflower seeds said angrily, "What's the point in saying so much to this kid? Call the police and have them bring your dad back. Just have the kid leave an address."

The woman thought for a moment, then said: "When dad was in the rest home, he played chess with people all the time. Mahjong too. Some of the old gentlemen there practiced Taichi and Taichi sword, but he wasn't interested at all. That's what old Uncle Li told me."

I nodded. That was nothing special.

She continued, "Later, some young foreigners from the Rotary Club [155] came to volunteer. Dad was really eager to play Go and Chinese Chess with them [156]. They were all foreigners, and dad was really patient with them. He didn't just teach them Go and Chinese Chess, but also learned western Chess from them."

It really seemed like Master had a good time then.

The woman took a sip of hot tea. "Dad is just a warmhearted person. From what Uncle Li said, he got really good at western Chess."

I could only nod. It wasn't difficult to imagine Master enthusiastically forcing people to learn Go and Chinese Chess.

Looking like she wanted to laugh, the woman continued, "Who would have thought that when Master taught them how to play Go, there was a smart young man who actually beat him a few times."

I'd never played Go before, so I don't really know how difficult it would be for a beginner to win, but I can only imagine the tragic scene in which a bunch of old men are suddenly beaten by a novice. [157]

The woman went on slowly, "That particular young man came back often to play with dad. Maybe I should say they were glued together. Dad would beg him to play, sometimes dozens of games per day. Dad just wouldn't give up. Sometimes the young man would play five or six games with different people at the same time. Occasionally he would play a few of the games blind, or sometimes mix in Chinese Chess as well."

"Play blind?" I asked. "Like, he closed his eyes?"

It seemed the woman was very familiar with Go. She said, "Basically, you don't look at the board, and play only by relying on your memory. It's incredibly difficult, not to mention if you are playing against multiple opponents. That boy was really some kind of prodigy. Considering he was a novice, it's almost impossible to believe."

The woman's eyes suddenly lit up. "That boy really was kind-hearted. After dad ran away from the rest home, he would send a new-years greeting card every year. Just two days ago, another one came. He said he would be coming to Taiwan to visit, and if there was a chance, he would love to meet with his old Go teacher."

As I listened, I began to plan how to figure out whether Master could play Go.

After that, I chatted with the woman about some of Master's old stories, and then finally rose and took my leave. It wasn't until the woman had led me to the door to leave that I suddenly remembered something she'd said when I first arrived.

"You said there was some very important reason you needed to find your dad for. What was that? Should I tell him something for you?"

"I'm not really sure," she said, tilting her head to the side and frowning. "In any case, it's something important, so please make sure to pass the message to dad. Tell him to come home as soon as possible."

This was really weird. Maybe she just missed her dad too much.

"I'll tell him," I said. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye." The woman shut the door.

[154] I'm not sure if I included a link to Qigong, which is a system of breathing techniques, in previous chapters. Qigong main article: <http://tinyurl.com/8mgo3>. Qigong martial arts application: <http://tinyurl.com/nxdr47c>

[155] Here's information about the Rotary Club
<http://tinyurl.com/2sj6wn>

[156] For anyone not familiar with Go and Chinese chess, here's some info: Go <http://tinyurl.com/7alp5ce> and Chinese Chess <http://tinyurl.com/748xfu>

[157] Being somewhat familiar with Go and having played it, I can say that for a beginner to beat someone even remotely familiar with the game would be astounding, let alone someone good at it.